

TALES OF THE SUN EATER

VOLUME 3



CHRISTOPHER
RUOCCHIO

TALES OF THE SUN EATER

VOLUME 3

CHRISTOPHER RUOCCHIO

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER RUOCCHIO

EMPIRE OF SILENCE

HOWLING DARK

DEMON IN WHITE

KIGNDOMS OF DEATH

ASHES OF MAN

DISQUIET GODS (Coming April 2024)

THE LESSER DEVIL

QUEEN AMID ASHES

TALES OF THE SUN EATER, VOL. 1

TALES OF THE SUN EATER, VOL. 2

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

* * *

IT HAS LONG BEEN MY CONTENTION THAT A READER MIGHT READ THESE *Tales of the Sun Eater collections* never having read any of my work. That was certainly true of *Volume 1*, and still true of *Volume 2*. It was possible to read about events from the books and not really have them spoiled, as the stories in those collections did not really spoil the action of the books, even if it discussed them, since it usually discussed them loosely or broadly.

That being said, there are two stories in this book in particular, “After the Feast” and “Daughter of Swords,” that spoil major developments in the series, and I cannot in good conscious recommend a reader pick up this collection without first reading the main series through the end of *Ashes of Man* (that is book five of the main sequence).

For those curious, here is my recommended reading order for the Sun Eater series, including all novels, novellas, and short story collections:

1. *EMPIRE OF SILENCE*
2. *THE LESSER DEVIL*
3. *HOWLING DARK*
4. *QUEEN AMID ASHES*

5. *TALES OF THE SUN EATER, VOL. 1*
6. *DEMON IN WHITE*
7. *TALES OF THE SUN EATER, VOL. 2*
8. *KINGDOMS OF DEATH*
9. *ASHES OF MAN*
10. *TALES OF THE SUN EATER, VOL. 3*
11. *UNTITLED LORIAN NOVELLA (UPCOMING)*
12. *DISQUIET GODS (UPCOMING)*

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

#

“Christopher,” you ask, “when are these short stories going to be available in print? Why are they only ebooks?”

This is the third of my *Tales of the Sun Eater* collections, ebook-only compilations of my short fiction set within the Sun Eater universe. I have written in excess of 20 short stories now (seven in Volume 1, six in Volume 2, and seven again in this third volume, as well as a couple others not-yet collected—usually for contractual reasons).

If you’ve read the first two volumes, you’ll know that the plan is to collect ALL of the short fiction in the Sun Eater universe in a single printed volume after the conclusion of the main series of novels with the release of the as-yet-untitled Book Seven, likely sometime in 2025. I did not want to release an incomplete collection of short stories, and so decided to bide my time and wait to release a larger collection at the end of the series of novels. But there was a problem: you all wanted to read the stories *now*, and you didn’t want to have to purchase twenty different anthologies to do it.

So I struck on a compromise: release the short stories in smaller chunks, but release them as ebook-only. They're smaller, bite-size collections, so it was hoped even folks who were usually ebook-averse might consider the purchase, and this way the ultimate collection will be all the more special when it releases in hardcover or paperback, because it will be the first time all these stories are available together in print.

This will be the third and (for now) final volume of the ebook-only *Tales of the Sun Eater* series. As things stand, we're coming up on the release of *Disquiet Gods*—the penultimate book in the Sun Eater series—and what few new stories I expect to generate between now and then will be enough to fill out the ultimate collection. It is possible this series of ebook-only releases will resume in the future, building up to a second ultimate collection of stories, but for now, this is it.

As I've said before elsewhere, the stories in this collection don't form a coherent whole. Each was envisioned and written independently of the rest. A few of them feature characters from the main series of novels, while others are well removed from Hadrian Marlowe and his story. There are a couple relatively high-profile short stories that are *not* in this collection. Some of you will remember the release of my short story "The Royal Game" from April of 2023. That story is not included here, as it is tied-up in a contract with *Grimdark Magazine*. Likewise, my novelette "The Guns of Pharos," which will be appearing in the *Empire of Silence | Diamond Edition* that will ship in December 2023, is not here, as it will remain exclusive to backers of that campaign for the foreseeable future.

The stories that *are* here, however, are mostly new. Of the seven, only three are reprints. "The Archaenaut" appeared in *Time Troopers*, which I edited with Hank Davis; "Mother of Monsters" appeared in *Worlds Long Lost*, the last anthology I produced while employed by Baen Books (and likely my last anthology ever); and "Gutter Ballet" originally appeared in

No Game For Knights, which was edited by my friends Larry Correia and Kacey Ezell.

The other four stories are all new. “[Re]incarnation” had been intended for a collection of cyberpunk stories, but the small press that commissioned the story closed up shop earlier this year, and the book was never produced. The remaining stories were written with the intention of going into this volume. They include “A Parable in Iron,” which is a more experimental piece; “After the Feast,” which features Otavia Corvo, and “Daughter of Swords,” which is from the point of view of Cassandra Marlowe.

There is no Hadrian POV story in this collection, a first for the *Tales* series, though he does appear.

But I have not answered the question. When is the ultimate collection of Sun Eater stories coming out? Answer: Probably AD 2026.

“But Christopher!” you exclaim, “That is three years away!”

“Well, more like two and half,” say I.

Here’s the thing: I’ve done the math. Short story collections don’t sell well via traditional publishing. They really only appeal to people who are already readers. Fortunately, I had a great deal of success with Kickstarter, running the *Diamond Edition* of *Empire of Silence*. Next year, in AD 2024, I will be rolling out the *Diamond Edition* of *Howling Dark*, with *Demon in White* to follow in AD 2025. At this point, Book Seven will have been released, and it will be time to think about the ultimate collection.

That collection will be produced as a Kickstarter, but one not limited to 1000 copies (like we have been limited with the main series). It will be open and available to all, at different quality levels. Leatherbound. Hardcover. Paperback. Illustrated. Etc.

Once that campaign is complete, the book will likely appear on Amazon print-on-demand, but the campaign will come first. The ultimate collection will combine all the stories in *Tales 1, 2, and 3*, as well as outstanding stories like “The Royal Game,” along with several new stories.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this collection.

As always, thank you for buying this book and for supporting the Sun Eater universe. I hope you will enjoy these stories. If you came here after reading the main series, I hope this short return to the world of Hadrian and Valka, of the Cielcin and the Sollan Empire, will entertain. If, on the other hand, this is our first meeting, Reader, I hope the stories here will not only be entertaining, but a gateway to *Empire of Silence* and the rest of the series.

1

AFTER THE FEAST

* * *

OTAVIA CORVO WAS CAPTAIN OF THE IMPERIAL BATTLESHIP TAMERLANE, THE left hand of Hadrian Marlowe himself. Little is known about her origins. She was Norman, and it is speculated that she was a homunculus, for she stood more than seven feet high. Her sacrifice at the Battle of Akterumu permitted Marlowe and his paramour, the sorceress Valka of Tavros, to escape. But that was not the end of her story. Not quite.

– Originally published in this volume.

* * *

SEE IT DONE.

Her own words floated back to her, carried by the slow action of memory. That same action—the action of nerve and neuron—brought her pain. Her vision swam, and she felt cold steel against her face, beneath her hands. She remembered . . . remembered the image on the holograph

window—set to ape the view from along the great vessel’s starboard side—remembered feeling hope as the little, tall-finned ship broke away.

She must have struck her head.

Her whole world was throbbing.

See it done.

It was done. They were gone. *He* was gone.

Escaped. Rescued.

She could remember the blackness as the little ship’s warp projectors folded space itself, a ring of utter dark about the little vessel: the edge of the curtain of night.

The curtain of night.

That curtain had pulled across the retreating ship, and pulled down one of the two towers—like teeth—that marked the gates of the hellish and inhuman city that they had come to at the end of their long and terrible road.

Making the jump to warp inside a planet’s atmosphere was madness. A starship’s warp drive worked by folding space itself, and what was a fold in space?

Only gravity.

For an instant, something like a black hole had existed above that nameless, hideous planet, mere hundreds of feet from its surface. In the upheaval of that instant, Otavia Corvo had felt herself lifted from her feet—and everything on the bridge of her shipwrecked battleship with her—and pulled toward that blackness. In that instant, the horde of inhuman Cielcin warriors swarming over the sands outside had been pulled from the ground and dragged dozens, hundreds of feet into the sky, the stones and dust of that hideous world with them. She remembered flying, remembered seeming to fall up and to starboard.

She must have struck the bulkhead and fallen when the *Ascalon* jumped beyond light.

For as quickly as it had formed, that blackness—that bubble in the fabric of space and time—had shot away, vanished up beyond the clouds.

The upheaval had lasted less than a second, but that had been enough.

Alarms were blaring, running on emergency power.

See it done.

See what done? It was done!

They had set out from Padmurak, secreted aboard that damned Lothrian freighter, to save her people—her crew. In that, they had failed. The Cielcin had taken them, had taken her whole ship, her *Tamerlane*, and with it ninety thousand men. Those ninety thousand had been marched out upon the black sand outside and slaughtered by the alien horde.

But at least Hadrian had escaped.

Hadrian. And Val.

It was an easy choice, she remembered saying, and groaned. “Easy choice . . .” She pushed herself to a kneeling position, braced herself against the console to her right.

You’re not dying to save the others anymore, he’d said. *It’s just Valka and me!*

“Still an easy choice,” Corvo said, looking round her ruined bridge.

She knew what Hadrian was, had seen him perform wonders. He had shot himself in the chest on that very bridge, but the bullet had passed clean through him without harm. On Berenike, he had weathered the blast of the enemy’s artillery, emerged from the firestorm unscathed. She had watched him pull a blazing sword from Udax’s funeral pyre and suffer no hurt.

He said that he had visions of the future, said that he had seen an ending to the war, and to the xenobites who had brought that war to mankind’s suns.

And he had returned from death.

Corvo had not been there, had not seen the Cielcin Prince Aranata Otiolo strike off his head. But Val had, and she had sworn that it was true,

had shown Corvo the recording Pallino's suit cam had made of the incident.

Hadrian had died and been restored to life, and if that much was true, then perhaps all of it was true. Perhaps he was the one to end it all, the one to lead mankind to victory over the Cielcin horde and their Pale King.

But her part in that story was over.

She was dead already, though she yet drew breath.

What followed was merely coda. Epilogue.

A dead woman she might have been, alone on the wreck of her vessel, surrounded by uncounted thousands of the enemy, but there was much she might yet do. Though the *Tamerlane* was disabled, its arsenals depleted, they had managed to do much harm with the beam weapons whose capacitors were still in place, and more with the upheaval that had accompanied the *Ascalon*'s escape.

There was yet more she could do, and no way out.

The *Ascalon* had been the only smaller ship they'd had capable of making the trans-luminal jump, and it was gone.

She had known that when she told Val to blast off, had known that she would die—perhaps last of all her crew.

Her Red Company.

Groaning, she stood—nearly eight feet of cord and sinew—and gripped the rim of the holography well at the center of the bridge. How many battles had she commanded from that very spot? With that very console?

No more.

The console was dead and dark. The upheaval caused by the *Ascalon*'s departure must have damaged the *Tamerlane*'s remaining systems. Seeing this, Corvo slammed her fist against the polished glass of the holography table's surface, hoping blunt force might stir the machine to life. Without it, she might not be able to command what few of the ship's weapons remained operational.

How then was she to strike at the enemy?

Since the day Vauclain and his people had come to purchase her and her sisters from the school on Kanthi, Otavia Corvo had known that she would die by violence. She had never suspected that she would die the captain of a Sollan Imperial battleship, would die fighting the Cielcin on some godforsaken planet beyond the edges of human space. She had always imagined it would be in some dust-up against another Exalted Captain, one of Vauclain's peers. It *should* have been at Bonaero, with her sisters—with all her sisters save Soraia and Calixta and Teresinha. It *should* have been at Aulazon, when Soraia and Teresinha fell, or at Charax, where Calixta succumbed to her wounds.

But she had survived it all, the last of her sisters, her creche-mates. The last of Vauclain's Immortals, his five hundred. Wandering, bereft, a warrior with no master, she sold herself—as she had been sold by those that had made her—to the first mercenary outfit that had happened along. For years, she had served as one of Emil Bordelon's Black Dogs, had helped him install the Admiral Marius Whent on Pharos.

On Pharos, she had met Hadrian Marlowe. Marlowe had killed Bordelon, and ended her indenture. He might have taken it up himself, bound her to him in service, just as Vauclain had bound her when he ordered her and her sisters designed. Just as Bordelon had bound her when she had nowhere else to go.

He had hired her instead and given her a ship—and when the Sollan Emperor had given him a ship far greater, he had made her the captain of his Red Company.

Fifteen thousand crewmen.

Five thousand aquilarii pilots.

Seventy thousand legionnaires in cold storage. Chiliarchs, centurions, decurions, triasters, duplicarii, and common men.

Ninety thousand souls . . .

All lost. All dead . . . or yet dying on the black sands outside.

Some captain I turned out to be, she thought, and screwed her eyes shut, forcing herself to think. To focus. “Console’s down,” she said. “Tac console.”

The tactical console lay in the pit below the captain’s overlook, down the stairs to her right. She stumbled toward them, mindful of the slight cant of the deck beneath her boots. She had shed the wretched, too-small environment suit they had found in the Lothrian freighter that had brought them to that terrible place. Without it, she had no shoes, and there had not been time to find her cabin since they stormed the ship. The steel was cold beneath her feet, and the metal stairs bit as she hurried down to the tactical console.

Lorian’s console.

Lorian was probably dead. He had been aboard the great battleship when it was taken, captured by the Cielcin with the help of the Lothrian traitors, captured and brought to that black and terrible world.

Her fingers tapped the keys of Lorian’s console. Her mind was starting to clear, vision starting to focus, dizziness and disorientation giving way to a dull and throbbing ache. One hand went to the crown of her head, felt the bruised skin and bone.

But there was no blood.

The tac console did not respond. The holograph plate did not so much as flicker.

Cursing, Corvo knew that she had done all she could from the bridge.

See it done.

The thought was like a knell, forever echoing in her mind. A drumbeat. A call to action.

Still, she did not know what *it* was, did not know what she could do. With the command console dead, and the tactical console unresponsive, there was nothing she could do on the bridge. Nothing to *see done*.

In the silence that followed her surrender at the tac console, she could hear the distant roaring, the stamp and alien chanting of the crowd outside. The horde that had taken her people. She clenched her fists—fists that could crush a man’s arm—until her sinews creaked.

There had to be something.

Not knowing what that something was, not knowing where she was going, or what she would do when she got there, Otavia Corvo mounted the biting metal steps back to the captain’s walk. The great holograph plate that dominated the forward wall and played the role of a window still showed the view out the mighty battleship’s starboard side, angled up and back toward the stern and the *Tamerlane*’s vast engine. Its curling wing and bristling equator shone black against the colorless, pale sky. For a moment, Corvo stood transfixed, peering out at the desert of sand like charcoal and the pillars of jade-colored stone rising at intervals from it. Far beyond them, the great ring-wall of the inhuman city rose like mountains almost at the horizon.

She had not imagined it. The flight of the *Ascalon* had struck down one of the two towers that marked the mouth of that dark land. Its twin still stood, square-crowned with pointed machicolations like teeth.

She had never seen its like, kept thinking of what Valka had said when they’d made their descent—the mighty *Tamerlane* lowered from space by Cielcin lifter rockets.

“The Cielcin did not build this.”

The Cielcin were capable of tremendous feats of engineering, could turn whole moons into vast warships. But they did not build cities above ground. They had evolved in the darkness, in the mud beneath the surface of their world, and beneath the surfaces of other worlds they preferred to remain.

But if the Cielcin did not build that hideous place—if they merely found it . . . who did?

The thought froze her. The idea—the reality—that the universe was vaster and more strange than anything she could have ever conceived of.

What was she measured against all that immensity? All that strangeness?

Only one woman, and doomed.

It was enough. Would have to be enough.

She was not going to die there waiting for the enemy to find her, she was not going to lie down for the Cielcin. Unbidden, the sallow, hairless face of Emil Bordelon—his eyes like stars—floated from the depths of her mind. Bordelon had been a butcher without peer, a brigand and a robber—and her master for many years.

“You’ll meet a bad end, Corvo,” he’d said to her, on more than one occasion. “Bitch like you’s got nothing but bite in her. Sooner or later, someone will put you down.” He had smiled then, smiled that smile that utterly transformed his face, turning him from killer to callow youth. It was a boy’s smile, open and easy, though it was plastered over the brutality of the man as a whore’s makeup hides her sores. “Hells, I might do it myself, if you try me.”

How she had hated him! But he had held her contract, and so held her loyalty—and her love. She could never have raised a hand against him, no matter how hard she tried. Thus the geneticists had made her—had made all her sisters, Soraia and Calixta and Teresinha.

Perfect soldiers. Strong. Obedient. And good.

She had not questioned it when Vauclain had ordered her and her sisters to torch the School at Kanthi, to shoot the doctors and the nurses, to strangle the children designed for other buyers. When Bordelon had ordered her to bomb the rebel base on Pharos, she had obeyed, knowing full well the town was full of innocents. How many times had she stood guard at Bordelon’s door while his captive women screamed and cried as he took them?

She'd stopped counting, if she'd started.

Bitch like you's got nothing but bite in her . . .

But she was no bitch, no dog.

"I am . . . Captain of the *Tamerlane*," she murmured to herself, grounding herself in the present, in the *now*. She was her own master, and no man's slave. Hadrian had burned her contract, wiped it from the face of the universe when he had destroyed Bordelon's ship and him along with it. "Captain."

Hadrian had freed her, and so earned her loyalty. Her loyalty . . . and . . .

The bridge doors did not slide open as she approached. Instead she pounded on the mechanical override, releasing the latch that held the door closed. She had to pry the doors open, though they slid smoothly on magnetic rails. The hall beyond was dark, lit only by the low, red glow of emergency lighting. Cables hung down from a place in the ceiling where the crashing of her ship—like a mountain range brought down from heaven—had dislodged them.

There was no sign of the enemy.

Still, Corvo drew her sidearm, for all the good it would do.

The revolver had been Vauclain's. Part of his personal collection, though Vauclain had possessed no hands to wield it. The old monster always said it had come out of Earth herself, but Corvo did not believe it. He'd had it refitted to take the standard 0.5 *uncia* rounds. The familiar feel of the metal in her fingers was a reassuring weight. The torn cables overhead sparked as she approached.

There was a guard post just ahead and to starboard. She had passed it in her haste to reach the bridge, but she stopped and muscled her way inside. There would at least be additional shield charges she might use—if the Cielcin had not totally stripped the vessel in the long years they'd held it for the voyage from Padmurak to that black, nameless world.

They had, or had at least stripped the guard room that kept watch on the bridge. The Cielcin were not great lovers of science, did little research for its own sake—or so it always seemed. Their technology had forever struck Corvo as primitive when measured against man's own achievements. They were great builders, that could not be denied, had been known to forge great engines into hollowed asteroids and pitted moons, to convert such lifeless worlds to vessels vaster than any of man's. But their engines, even their warp engines, were crude things, made so vast as if because they struggled to build anything smaller, finer, more delicate.

But they were great pillagers and slavers of men. And their Pale King, the one the Imperials called the *Scourge of Earth*, and whom Hadrian called *Dorayaica*, was the very worst. It had never encountered a human technology it would not bend to its own purpose. Its men had taken every shield charge, every belt and scrap of armor, every lance and plasma rifle and ship's security stunner. Corvo had only her gun. She resisted the compulsion to check her magazine.

She had five bullets.

Five, against the horde outside her ship. Millions strong.

They had already killed her people, awakened them from their icy beds and driven them out onto those black and bloodthirsty sands.

Corvo could hear the sound of feet, the padding of soft soles, the tap and clangor of claws.

They were on the ship. She'd known that much. Some had followed Hadrian and Karim and Pallino when they'd crashed their shuttle into the *Tamerlane's* dorsal hull. Still more had remained aboard the sunken starship after they had decanted the crew and packed them out through the lighters' launch tubes onto the sands outside.

She was not alone.

A shadow flickered across the narrow slit of the half-open doors. A second. A third.

An advance team. A scouting party. They must have guessed she was on the bridge after she had used the secondary weapons to fire on the crowd outside. Pressing herself against the wall, she risked a glance back down the hall the way the enemy had come, heard their rough voices barking in their animal language.

Only three.

She could kill three.

Almost she lurched from her hiding place. Almost she sprang upon them, roaring like the thunder and striking at the last for her vanished people.

Almost . . .

They would be certain to sound the alarm. Certain to bring the horde down on her entire.

Instead she waited. Let them search the bridge. Let them find her gone. Let them come back the way they had come. Micron by micron, inch by inch, she wedged the door open, prepared to leap from the shadow of the abandoned guardroom.

Eventually they returned, moving more slowly than they had come, frustrated—she guessed—by their apparent failure.

Three shadows passed in the hall outside. Corvo steeled herself, ready to spring. She would have to strike fast to stop them calling for aid. Horribly tall they were, taller even than she, man-shaped but crowned with long and crooked horns. Their armor was deepest black, and so glossy it seemed wet. The hindmost—the leader, perhaps—clutched its scimitar in one six-fingered hand, its blade the same milk-white as its flesh.

Before she could spring, they halted.

The one with the sword turned back. She saw its face for an instant before she pulled back round the corner. It looked like a skull, like all its kind, its eyes vaster black pits without iris or sclera, its nose flat slits that flared as it snuffled. The Cielcin were nearly blind in all but the lowest

light, relying on lenses and goggles to see. In the dim of the dying battleship, surely their senses were heightened, were sharper than hers.

Sight, hearing . . .

Smell.

One of the others turned back, spoke to its leader.

The leader said nothing, padded nearer the open door. Corvo pressed herself against the bulkhead, hardly daring to breath, absurdly conscious of her own sweat. The xenobite was sure to smell it—to smell her.

Five bullets. Three Cielcin.

But were they shielded?

The one with the drawn sword had reached the door. It stood there a moment, not quite entering. She could hear the beast snuffling, sniffing for her.

Let it turn, she thought, praying to whatever gods there were, to Mother Earth or Ahura Mazda or whatever god-thing it was her Hadrian served, that the creature would turn and show her its back.

Whatever god it was that heard her, Otavia Corvo never knew.

But the beast turned, and—jerking its head to one side—barked something in its rough language to its fellows.

Corvo moved, coming off the wall, gun in hand. She aimed Vauclain's antique pistol at the back of the xenobite's head, at the soft spot behind the horns where its white and ropey hair grew thickly. She fired.

Four bullets.

The inhuman monster's head exploded, and it fell, dropping its long and crooked sword. Corvo leaped over the monster's body, caught one of its fellows by the wrist to stop it drawing its sword, slammed the muzzle of her gun up under its chin and fired. Black blood painted the wall behind it, flecked her cheeks. She blinked it away.

Three bullets.

Shocked by her sudden appearance and the terrible violence of it, the third staggered back. Monsters the Cielcin might have been, but they could still experience fear. But the beast drew its sword, and to her surprise made no attempt to communicate her presence—perhaps her gunshots had done enough. Corvo raised her gun and fired.

The bullet—her third, precious bullet—shattered against the unseen curtain of the creature’s energy shield. Seeing this, the Cielcin bared its teeth like broken glass. Knowing her gun was useless, Corvo rushed the creature. The xenobite slashed at her, blade whistling in the close air. Corvo rocked back a step, dancing over the corpse of the Cielcin she had just slain. The one still living thrust at her, and Corvo caught its wrist, pulling the blade past her. With her other hand, she hammered the xenobite in the face, slamming the butt of Vauclain’s gun into the flat place where a nose ought to have been.

Once, twice, three times her fist fell, and the fingers that gripped the knife went numb and limp. She was *strong*, stronger than any common man, stronger even than any palatine of the Imperium. Thus she had been made: a homunculus, the last of Vauclain’s Immortals, his warrior women.

Her bones turned the alien bone to splinters, the inhuman face to pulp. When it fell, its knife came free in her hand.

Then she was alone in the dim and sparking hallway, breast heaving.

So many years closeted on the Lothrian freighter . . . she was not what she used to be. Though her body retained its condition better than that of any common man, she could feel it: the weakness. Hardly could she remember ever feeling so tired.

Three dead.

Two bullets.

See it done. That voice resounded once again. Her own voice, and Vauclain’s. She could still hear him, even after all those years. Her first master, her *father*, in a sense. He had caused her to be made, had ordered

her from the doctors at the school. How well she remembered his face, his severed head socketed to life support, forever sleeping, forever issuing his edicts through his machines.

See it done, Daughter.

She had loved him, and feared him—but never hated him, as she had hated Bordelon.

See it done.

She had to keep moving, though where she was moving to or for what she could not say. She had slain three more of the enemy, would slay as many as she could before the end. Slowly she holstered the ancient pistol and, stooping, took up the sword the inhuman captain had let fall. The weapon would have been too long for an ordinary man to wield one-handed, but Corvo could manage. It was not heavy, being made of some ceramic lighter and harder than steel, but its size and balance were not wrought for human hands.

Sword and knife in hand, she hurried on, moving along hallway after hallway, stair after stair.

The *Tamerlane* was truly massive, a battleship more than twelve miles long. When fully operational, a magnetic tram system ran along its length and along branches that might have carried her up and down its nearly one hundred levels. That tram was surely destroyed, its power cut, its rails and passages broken by the slow descent to ground. That vast starship had never been meant to land, and the pressure of that profane world's gravity had been enough to stress the vessel's every strut and spar to collapsing. Time and again, Corvo would hear the great vessel groan, hear the creaking of metal as some part of the ship's superstructure threatened to give way.

Hadrian had told her once that there was a people on Old Earth who buried their kings in boats, then buried those boats in mounds beneath the earth.

Her *Tamerlane* would make for her a mighty tomb, one mightier than the barrows of any of those ancient kings, who had commanded that their servants and serving women be buried alive with them, that they might forever serve their lords in the afterlife.

The afterlife . . .

Corvo knew not if such a place existed. Hadrian had not spoken to her of any such next reality when he had returned from death, though he had spoken of a light, of a darkness with light beneath. But if such a thing were real, if there was a next life...none would serve in it. She was the one sealed alive in her own tomb, and no servant.

She was a captain, would die a captain.

It was only when she had almost reached the door that Otavia Corvo understood whither her feet had carried her.

The door was shut, did not seem to have been cut or forced at any point during the years the ship had been in Cielcin hands. It did not seem possible that they should not have found it, not taken it for what it was.

The captain's quarters.

Her quarters.

And yet the door responded to her manual override, the mechanics engaging now the ship was under emergency power. As with the door to the garret outside the bridge, Corvo had to force the slab of heavy, process-blackened titanium into its pocket in the frame. Fortunately, the door opened to the left, following the pitch of the sloping corridor, and gravity aided her in her mission. Retrieving the sword she had propped beside the door, she passed within.

Impossibly, all was where she had left it.

Her quarters were—after the Lord's Suite which Hadrian had occupied with Val—the largest on the *Tamerlane*, but still they were not overlarge. Most of the great battleship's volume was given over to its engines, its launch flumes, and its cargo bays, and to the great cubiculum along the

dorsal hull where the tens of thousands of her Red Company had slumbered on ice. Still, she'd had a small suite of rooms: the lounge that doubled as her private office—she had done most of her work in the ready room off the bridge—and the bedchamber beyond, with its private bath. There was access through a rear hatch to a private lift tube that once might have carried her to the officers' mess.

There was still a towel draped over the arm of the couch beside the open door to her bedchamber. She had been showering when the news had come that Hadrian had vanished on the surface. Evidently her batman had not entered to tidy up, which surprised her. Ilia had always been so precise. She was—had been—a Norman, one of Corvo's own, and had joined the Empire when the Emperor had made their Hadrian a lord.

Lifting it, Corvo dabbed the spattered ichor from her face. She had somehow expected the towel to still be wet, as though no time had passed at all. Only the low, red glare of the emergency lighting was there to indicate a change—that, and the gentle sloping of the deck beneath her feet, and the slow groan and creaking of the ship's superstructure as its own weight threatened to destroy the old bird for good and all.

The twin plates of a tabletop holograph projector stood on the table beside the couch, against the wall by the door. Sensing her movement, the plates stirred to life. They showed a silent reel of footage: six women, all of them impossibly tall, broad-shouldered, bronze-skinned with hair as pale as bone. Each muscled as the marble statues of heroes that lined the halls and streets of the Eternal City on Forum, each lovely in the face as Venus herself.

Nuria, Catarina, Julinha, Teresinha, Calixta . . . and Otavia herself.

As she watched, the six Immortals adjusted their sculpted cuirasses, smiling at one another as they kitted up for the first time.

Her sisters.

Vauclain had dressed them in the Imperial style, as so many petty warlords did. White plate over black tunics and gold-fringed pteruges. Gold feathers crowned Catarina's helm—she was their centurion . . .

Gripping the knife in her teeth, Corvo snapped the projector closed, forcing the plates together. The image of her sisters vanished, and she closed one massive hand around the projector box entire.

It did not leave her hand as she turned and left the front room for her personal quarters . . .

Bullets . . . she needed more bullets. She kept a small box of ammunition in the locker at the foot of her bed. Laying the knife and sword down, she opened it, immediately drew out the pair of boots still there, untouched. No standard issue footwear could have accommodated her, and so she was glad to have found the old things still in their proper place.

But the bullets were gone.

For a moment, Corvo did not move, only knelt there, at the foot of her bed, in the center of her old life, clinging to the last pieces of that life older still.

The holograph. The gun.

Two bullets.

Only *two*.

There had to be *something*, something she could do. Primary power was gone. The engines could never have survived the descent to the planet's surface, and the Cielcin had drained her fuel reserves in any case. With the bridge off-line, she could no longer wield the ship's batteries of laser weapons . . .

. . . but their capacitors.

The glimmerings of a last, dark thought sparked in Otavia Corvo's head.

A dark thought, with light underneath.

The capacitors.

The beam weapons didn't draw power directly from the ship's then-dead reactor. The reactor charged a series of capacitors capable of storing the several petawatts of energy necessary for the prolonged firing of the ship's beam weapons.

If she could overload them . . .

The resultant force, while far less explosive than the destruction of the ship's main reactors or a breach in antimatter fuel containment might have been, would still be enough to cause untold levels of destruction. She might take thousands of the enemy down with her.

Tens of thousands.

It was enough.

It was *something*.

Something to *see done*.

Standing, Corvo caught sight of her reflection in the dead glass panel that had once imitated a window to the left of her bed. She had hacked off most of her coiling, bone-white hair, so that it made a nimbus about her face. She could not remember ever looking so tired, as though it was a ghost she saw, and not herself.

The long years hidden aboard that Lothrian freighter had wasted even her flesh, and bitterly she recalled the decade and more spent on ration bars and bromos protein.

"It will be over soon . . ."

The voice she heard was that of Calixta. Calixta, whom she had never loved—had hated, in fact. "Over . . ." Corvo could remember gripping her hand, feeling the tension in those fingers, the desperation—as though it were some cliff she hung to, and not the very precipice of life.

"Over . . ." Corvo murmured the word.

A sudden noise made her start, and she turned, regarded the half-open door with suspicion. Moving then with cat-like slowness, she slid first one foot into the boots she had set aside from the footlocker, then another. She

must have looked odd, dressed only in the skin-tight underlayment intended to go beneath armor and those boots, but needs must. She held the Cielcin knife—a short sword to any human being save herself—in one hand.

It had sounded like something falling, a book or box of papers in the sitting room outside.

Or knocked down . . .

The whole ship creaked about her as the superstructure continued to strain. Somewhere, more distantly, there came the quiet thunder as some other deck collapsed. Still moving with that pantherish slowness, Otavia Corvo snatched an officer's black uniform jacket from a hook on the wall and pulled one arm through it. The other. She placed the holograph projector—folded shut a thing no larger than a persimmon—in a pocket of that jacket. There was a second shield charge on the sideboard beneath the hook.

That was when she heard the droning. Faintly at first, but ever louder, like the buzzing of innumerate iron wings.

She knew that sound, though she had done little on-the-ground fighting in the Cielcin Wars. Every soldier knew it.

Nahute.

It was a weapon of the enemy, a serpent of coiled steel, driven by a dumb, mechanical will and buoyed by small-scale repulsors that ran along its length. At its head, a mouth like the inverted mouth of a lamprey whirred, studded with teeth of ceramic and cold steel. The drones sought heat, and—finding it—bored into the soft bodies of men until they reached center mass.

One had found her . . . or nearly so.

And where there was one, there would be others.

Where there was one, its owner would not be far.

Corvo did not dare move. From the pitch of the sound, it seemed as though the thing had wormed its way into the air of the sitting room outside.

The half-shut door to her bedchamber concealed her, but any motion might draw the thing to herself. Still, she could not remain there forever. Her bedchamber was a death trap. The only exit was through the main room.

The droning intensified, and Corvo saw it, like an adder drifting on the air, black and silver-blue where the repulsors gleamed along its smoothly segmented length. It drifted past the cracked door, seeming not to detect her. Somewhere in the middle-distance—in the hall perhaps—Corvo heard the click-and-pad of inhuman feet. The *nahute*'s master.

Again, the dying ship groaned, sending a series of cascading ripples through the vessel. Corvo felt the deck beneath her feet shake gently. She held her breath, steadied herself as she did so, almost shutting her eyes. For a moment, all seemed well. The *nahute*—suspended in the air—continued its lazy circuit of the outer chamber, seeming not to notice the shaking of the vessel about it, the instability of the deck as decks beneath it began to give and warp beneath the titanic weight of that battleship never intended to experience the gravity of a world.

Then the deck lurched as something far below them broke. Corvo lurched with it, arms thrown wide as she was made to widen her stance or fall.

That was enough to draw the machine's attention. Delicate sensors in the head found her, and that drilling cone of a mouth swiveled as eyes unseen fixed on her. Seeing the narrow gap in the door, the *nahute* shot straight for it, slithering through air as a serpent through seawater, rushing straight for her. Corvo had left the Cielcin scimitar on the foot of her bed, had only the long knife and her gun with its pair of final shots.

The gun was worse than useless against such an enemy, and the knife hardly better than.

But Corvo's shield saved her life. Ordinarily, the drone would have latched itself to her side, just below the rib line, and drilled its way up beneath that cage of bone to turn heart and lung and kidney all to pulp

within her. But so fast did it accelerate toward her that it ran straight into the energy curtain of her body shield. The Royse barrier absorbed the kinetic energy of impact, stopped the serpent dead, made it recoil, twisting in the air. It was only a matter of time before the thing got its bearings and circled round for a second attempt. By the third—certainly by the fourth—it would move slow enough to penetrate Corvo’s last and only real defense.

She had to act quickly.

One mighty hand closed about the trunk of the iron serpent, just below the head. The weapon’s foolish iron brain lashed out, slashed at her with its tail. The drill-head of its mouth spun round with a noise like the grinding of stones. But Otavia Corvo did not let go. Whirling, she slammed the thing’s snarling mouth against the hard metal of the wall, hammering it until it sparked, went limp in her fist.

Satisfied it was dead, she let it drop.

Too late, she saw its owner, a Cielcin taller even than she standing in the room outside, summoned by the noise of her assault.

“*Yukajji!*” it said, bearing its terrible fangs.

Corvo knew that word.

It meant *worm*.

Then the beast was gone, darted out in the hall. Spinning round to snatch up her stolen blade, Otavia Corvo hurried after it. Already she could hear it shouting in its rough and alien tongue, calling out to companions unseen and uncounted. She pelted after it, mighty thews driving her faster than anyone her size should be capable of moving. But she was still too late.

Reaching the hall, she found half a dozen of the enemy waiting for her, with still more filtering round the corner. Corvo skidded to a halt, boots squealing on the sheet metal floor.

Back!

The word clangored in her like a knell, sounding—as it so often did—in Vauclain’s dark voice. In Bordelon’s.

In Hadrian’s.

Back! Back!

She might have fled down the corridor behind, but she knew that to do so was only to set the enemy as dogs upon her heels, to fly from danger into danger.

She would never reach the capacitors, never strike her final blow.

Instead, she wheeled and lunged back into her chambers. If she could not shut the door, she would fight them in it. Let them come one by one! Let them fall!

Letting the sword drop, she seized on the door with her strong right hand and pulled the way shut. One long white arm thrust itself through the portal, and Corvo plunged her stolen dagger into the forearm. Blood like ink welled up and ran, coating the point of the knife where it emerged on the far side. Corvo twisted the blade, heard the xenobite bellow in pain and try to tug its arm away. It took her knife with it, and Corvo worked with both hands then to slam and lock the door.

They would find their way in before long, blast or cut the door down if they had to. She could not remain.

Only one avenue of escape was left to her, and snatching up her sword once more, she crossed the captain’s quarters to the convex door of the private lift-tube that would carry her to the officers’ mess. Its door was likewise dead, but Corvo prized it open, revealing the open shaft. The carriage was not in its place. She must have ridden it down to the officer’s mess or the gym or to some other location.

A stroke of luck, that. Or providence.

Was Hadrian’s god watching her, even then? Even there, in that . . . terrible place?

The *Tamerlane* was threaded through with networks of lift tunnels and tramways—some small as this, with pods capable of transporting only one or two persons at a time, some vast enough to transport heavy equipment all the way from bowsprit to stern cluster. Vast as the mighty vessel had been, at any time there might have been a hundred carriage pods in motion, traveling up and down, forward and aft, port and starboard.

Clutching her stolen sword in one hand, Otavia Corvo jumped into the open shaft. The way the ship was canted, it was just possible to slide along the tube's left side, sword held up above her head for relative safety. The shaft terminated three decks below. She hit the bottom with a thud, glad of her boots.

It was impossibly dark in the tunnel, but Corvo knew the passage ran straight along the length of the ship for more than a mile before branching left and down toward the gym, right and up toward the mess. She groped her way along the smooth walls of the passage. Blind, she kept one hand on the wall, ears pricking to detect the first sign of any pursuit.

But there was nothing.

The Cielcin must not have breached her chamber door. The minute they did, she felt certain there would be *nahute* speeding up the tunnel behind.

The tunnel itself was smooth as glass, without handhold or lamp or other mechanism. The tunnels were not meant to be traversed on foot, and were perfectly round in cross-section, so that Corvo staggered along the bottom of a metal tube hardly taller than she was herself. She envied Lorian Aristedes in that moment. The third officer was barely more than three cubits tall, hardly more than half her height. On one occasion at least, the little man had resorted to crawling through the air ducts to circumvent the soldiers of the Imperial Chantry when the ship had been detained by the Inquisition. The lift corridor would have seemed a cavern to him.

She passed a place where the corridor widened to allow one lift pod to pass another, and hurried on, the only sound her ragged breathing and the

constant, steady tramping of her heart.

At last she reached the end of the hall, nearly slammed into it in the dark.

“Left or right?” Her words were ragged, but listening for half an instant, she still detected no signs of pursuit.

The lift-trams worked on magnetic levitation, and so the shaft was smooth, without handhold or ladder. She would have to go left, have to go down toward the gym. From there—assuming she could open the hatch—it would be a matter of reaching the ship’s equator, the promenade that ran around the waist of the great ship. She had only to reach the access umbilical that ran from the equator up to one of the ship’s primary dorsal cannons. From there, she could overload the gun’s capacitor array.

The graphene batteries were enormously stable, but if she could start the cannon itself drawing power manually, start the process but override the firing mechanism, it would be possible to build up the charge in the cannon itself. The guns were meant to discharge in the case of such a power load, lest they explode, triggering a chain reaction that that would cascade along the vessel’s port side. Corvo had only the barest sense of how devastating such a cascade would be. With the ship fully operational, there were safeguards in place that should have prevented it from occurring at all. She had no way of knowing if it would work, if it could work . . .

See it done.

Half-leaping, half-sliding down the hardly sloping wall of the shaft, Corvo reached the lower doors and pried them open. The hall outside was dim with red light. She was on an inner corridor not far from the equator promenade, near the vessel’s starboard side.

“Not far,” she reassured herself, pausing to steady herself on the wall outside. “Not far.”

Her head was throbbing. Had she injured it when the upheaval caused by the flight of the *Ascalon* pulled her into the ceiling? Or was it only her

poor condition from so many years cramped aboard the freighter?

It did not matter.

The doors to the officers' gymnasium—wider than they were tall—stood closed. How many hours, how many sleepless nights had she whiled away behind those doors? Corvo knew the compulsion to maintain her physique had been built into her, but that had long ago ceased to bother her. It no longer mattered what parts of her were Vauclain's order or the design of the doctors at the school. Nobody chose what they were born—what they *were*. There were parts of every man's nature alien to him and alienating.

It did not matter, would not matter before long. Only *would have* mattered.

Everything she was had culminated in this final assault, in their effort to storm the *Tamerlane*, her and Val, Karim and Pallino. They saved Hadrian at least, and Val with him.

Two lives in ninety thousand.

Only two.

She prayed that two was enough.

The equatorial promenade was accessed by a narrow transverse corridor that cut across her corridor at right angles. Pressing herself against the brushed black metal of the wall, Corvo checked her corners. The coast was clear, and the ship shuddered as she swung into the side passage, cutting from the center of the great ship toward its outer edge. So far forward as she was—little more than a third of the way between the bowsprit and the stern—the *Tamerlane* was not wide, little more than a mile. She had perhaps a quarter of that to go, moving half-crouched along the narrow way, past doors open and closed, or broken in. The red emergency lamps guttered as she passed, their circuits damaged by the ship's slow, dead collapse.

It was a terrible end for so fine a vessel. The Empire but rarely built them so large.

The *Tamerlane* was one of the *Eriels*, of which only a dozen had been produced. She had been a gift to Lord Hadrian, one given by the Red Emperor himself. It should have died by fire, in the glory of battle, not crushed under its own weight, beached upon the surface of some alien world, left to die slowly, to collapse like the carcass of some rotting whale.

The pale light of that alien world streamed through windows ahead, and seeing it Corvo knew she had reached the promenade. The doors stood open ahead of her, permitting her a view out the narrow, slit-windows built at intervals between stretches of solid metal wall. It would not have done to build too many windows or too vast, but the shipwrights at Red Star had installed the window slits with the *Tamerlane*'s human crew in mind. In flight, the portals had allowed those on the promenade a view of the distant stars, a true view out into the universe.

It was the port side that lay nearer the ground, so as she moved toward it, she moved down. Thus those windows—which should have looked out upon the void and its scattered stars like diamonds—looked inside upon *the horde*.

The ground outside was *teeming* with the enemy, with Cielcin clad in black and gray and blues of all description. It was like witnessing the crowd at the Colosso, uncounted thousands—tens of thousands, hundreds—roiling and clamoring, pressing together. Above them, a black dome rose, a kind of temple, Valka had guessed. A shrine. Corvo had thought to fire on it when she first gained control of the great ship's weapons, but Hadrian had been too near, chained to the altar outside its gates. She had half a mind to fire on it, then, but every erg of energy she expended discharging the weapon would be energy not shunted to the blast, and she would need every ounce of power.

For a moment, she only stood there, staring at the black dome of the temple. She wasn't sure what it was about the place that so absorbed her. It was as if the ruin *spoke* to her, whispered to her in a language she could not

quite understand. So grand was it, and so grand the mountain-wall of the alien city across the desert plain in the distance, that Corvo felt an almost religious sense of awe. Some part of her wanted to fall to her knees in wonderment and holy terror—so overawing was the majesty and the sheer, titanic *scale* of that horrible place.

But she shook herself and moved on.

The Cielcin outside were crowded up against the *Tamerlane*'s base, doubtless hoping to climb aboard through the launch flumes that ran up to the flight deck. In wartime, each of those flumes was capable of launching its own lightercraft, one-manned *Peregrines*, two-manned *Sparrowhawks*. They had surely all been taken, stripped for parts.

It was a miracle the *Ascalon* had survived, overlooked in one of the mighty vessel's distant rear holds, but the Cielcin would not have missed the *Tamerlane*'s small fleet of lighters.

Access to the *Tamerlane*'s dorsal cannons could be found at regular intervals along the promenade, reached by a ladder that ran up through one of the almost buttress-like supports that rose above and angled out from the promenade itself. At high alert, each of the guns could be manned independently of the bridge, each relying on a two-man crew. Even if she could not overload the capacitors, she could fire the one cannon down on the swarming enemy.

But all thought of cannons and of capacitors fled Corvo's mind in the following instant.

There was noise on the promenade behind, and looking back, she saw a quartet of Cielcin warriors emerge onto the promenade. The sight of the creatures in the fell light of day, *on her ship*, filled Corvo with a rage and loathing she could never have articulated. Scrambling, she moved to press herself against the inner wall, hoping they would not see, would not have heard her booted feet ringing on the decking.

Too late.

“*Yukajji!*” The word chased her up the promenade, hurled like one of their *nahute* weapons. Corvo turned and ran. If she could reach the gun emplacement, reach the ladder, she could barricade herself inside, bottleneck her pursuers in the ladder umbilicus. The enemy would not be able to climb after her but one at a time, and she might yet have all the time she needed.

What she would have given for her sisters then. With even one of them to hand, they might have stood a chance. Perhaps Karim should have stayed with her, or Pallino. *Ah, if only Bastien were here.*

Bastien had been her First Officer since the Pharos days. A good soldier, and a better friend, and sharp as any of the Empire’s scholiasts . . .

But Bastien was almost certainly dead, butchered on the sands outside by a horde whose seeming-numberless forms writhed and swarmed like locusts outside.

She was alone.

Would die alone.

The noise of feet behind was like a thunder, and Corvo pushed herself as hard as she would go. With her powerful long limbs, she was faster than any man, but no man was faster than the Cielcin on level ground. The beasts rushed after her, and looking back, Corvo saw that two at least of the four were loping, relying on their hands almost as much as their feet.

There was nothing for it.

With a cry of frustration, of desperation, Otavia Corvo turned, sword in hand.

She did not shout a challenge. She had never been one for such shows. Still, the noise of one rang in her ears, the ghosts of her own people—her own men—still with her.

Halfmortal! They cried, roaring for Hadrian—Hadrian, who was alive, who had escaped that final hell. *Halfmortal! Halfmortal!*

The foremost of the Cielcin leaped at her, heedless of her sword and its danger, thinking perhaps that she would crumple. Thinking, perhaps, that she was weak. Its outstretched hands were red with human blood, the talons at the end of its fingers black and wicked. Corvo brought her stolen scimitar down into its shoulder, felt the zircon blade bite the white flesh at its collar. Still, the beast collided with her, and it was all Corvo could do to seize it by one prominent horn and twist it off of her, relying on the neck wound to distract the creature as she hurled it one-handed to the floor.

The second slashed at her with a scimitar of its own, and Corvo leaped backward, glad at least that none of the four wielded the flying nahute. As she clashed with this second, the other two still standing fanned out to encircle her, one with a sword like the other, the last with a pair of long knives.

The Cielcin did not use firearms. They spent their entire lives in the black of space. Their entire civilization dwelt not on planets, but in vessels great and small, spaces where a single shot might spell the doom of all. Man had himself employed the same logic, and the advent of personal shields had forced firearms out of their primary role eons ago.

Corvo parried a vicious blow from the second Cielcin, retreated as the third and fourth closed in. The first had not risen, lay bleeding on the floor to her left. Corvo thrust at the creature's flat, black eyes, but it battered her sword aside even as the one with the knives closed in.

The giantess lashed out with a foot, caught the knife-wielder in the sternum with a blow that knocked it from its feet. Before the others could close, Otavia Corvo lashed the air with a vicious cut that cleared the space before her. Pressing her advantage, she hurled herself at the one who had already attacked her. She had been so long trapped aboard that Lothrian ship, waiting for this day of revenge, that she had almost forgotten the strength of her arms. Even after so many years of waiting, there was a strength in her to match the strength of those inhuman beings.

And more than match.

Corvo caught the sword-arm of her assailant in one mighty fist. And raising high her sword she brought the spiked pommel down into the beast's left eye. Blood black as ink streamed down the monster's face, and as it staggered it dropped its sword from nerveless fingers. For an instant, the xenobite's nearest companion halted, stunned itself by the captain's blow. But Otavia Corvo did not stop. She thrust her blade at the bleeding creature's belly, felt the zircon part rubberized fabric and flesh. She drew the creature close, almost into an embrace, twisted her sword as she did so.

The action brought the memory of the massacre in the school rushing back to her, Vauclain—a severed head, even in those days—perched inside the floating box he called his *palanquin*. The blood of her teachers on her hands. The blood of old Corin, who had always been so kind to her.

“Why?” he had whispered as she had twisted the knife. “Tavi, why?”

Because I am what you made me.

Val had always called her *Tavi*, too. But Val was safe, her and Hadrian.

It was very nearly over. All of it. Very nearly done.

Corvo rounded on the next of her opponents, blade dripping like a quill pen. She raised that sword, and taking it in both hands brought it down upon the third Cielcin with the weight and force of a guillotine. The beast raised its scimitar to parry, but Corvo's blow smashed through the guard and into the monster's horned head.

Once, Otavia Corvo had watched a troupe of Eudoran mummers perform a bit of puppet theater in the streets of Monmara. The play—a farce—had ended with one of the players urging a child from the audience with a pair of scissors to cut the threads that animated the tyrant who had been the villain of the play. That puppet—a construction of aluminum and glowing plastic—had fallen to the stage in a heap.

So that Cielcin fell then, its own strings cut.

But it took her sword with it. The zircon lodged in the monster's bony head, there between the primary horns that jutted above the xenobite's eyes, and try as she might, it would not come free.

Twisting round, she found the one with the knives had regained its feet. Seeing her defenseless, it bared its fangs like glass, thin lips peeled back from gums black as rot. It barked something in its rough and alien tongue, something Corvo did not understand.

She had no weapons, could not reach for one of the fallen swords without falling prey to this creature's knives.

It leaped.

She drew her pistol instead, leaped sideways.

Aimed.

Fired.

The shot caught her enemy full in the face, and black blood and brain splattered the columns and slit windows of the promenade.

One bullet remained.

The access port was near.

Had she ever been so tired?

She tried not to think about the dead. Her sisters were dead. Vauclain was dead. Bordelon was dead. Bastien was dead. And Karim. And Pallino. All her brave soldiers.

All but Hadrian. Hadrian and Valka.

Her eyes swam, brimming with tears that could not be allowed to fall. There was no time for grief, no space for pain. There was still a battle to fight, a war to wage, a blow to strike against the enemy.

A sound drew her back to herself, and to the present moment.

A shuffling, clicking, scuffling. The rustle of fabric, jostling of metal and ceramic.

The noise of men approaching.

Stooping, Corvo bent to take up the swords of the Cielcin that had fallen dead about her.

They were *ahead* of her. *Between* her and her goal, had doubtless been drawn by the sound of fighting, by the noise of her gunshot.

There must have been a dozen of them at least, horned and fanged, wielding blades of zircon white as their alien flesh.

They fanned out, filling the promenade before her, fingering their blades.

They wanted her to run, to panic. They expected her to flee.

But she was bred for war, had been one of Vauclain's Immortals, one of Bordelon's Black Dogs...and Captain of the Meidua Red Company, the right hand of Hadrian Halfmortal himself.

She would not run. Not here. Not at the last.

Instead, she leaped at them with a roar like the damned—which she supposed she was.

For the barest moment, they quailed, and Otavia Corvo struck two of their number from the face of the universe. With her left hand she parried a blow from one of the fighters, and with her right she struck a blow so fearsome it struck the blade from her enemy's hand. Then she was through, and her own momentum upset her, so that she hit the deck with a roll that brought her back to one knee in time to raise her swords to save her life.

She was no great swordsman, could never have bested Hadrian or even Karim when it came to pure technique. Fencing was not a contest of strength, and both the Jaddian mongrel and the palatine lord were nimbler than she. But it was that strength that saved her, as she caught the full weight of two attackers as they rushed at her. Rising, she forced them back amid their fellows, battering them with her swords. Such was the fury of her onslaught that—for a moment—ten quailed before one.

Back on her feet, the giantess moved like the tide: slowly, inexorably, crashing into her foes. Another of the Cielcin fell before her, and yet

another fled back. But the others closed around her, and she was beset on all sides.

One cannot long stand against nine, not even one of Vauclain's Immortals, not even the Captain of the Red Company.

A stinging pain sliced the meat of one thigh, and Corvo gasped, circling to plunge her sword between the plates of one fighter's armor. Another blow caught Corvo in the shoulder, and she hissed, dropped the sword still caught between the ribs of her dying foe. Gritting her teeth, she took her one remaining sword in both hands and spun it in a wide arc, roaring as she swept the space about herself, desperate to clear it. She was lucky the blows had been cuts, and that neither was very deep. Still, the slash on her thigh smarted, stung. The Cielcin were known for coating their blades in acids, the better to inflict pain upon their wounded foes. Corvo speared one of her remaining foes with her blade, pressing forward, forcing the beast back into the wall. She felt the point of her ceramic sword break off as it struck the wall, blade buried in the creature's guts. The Cielcin dropped its own weapon, hands fluttering to seize the sword that had taken its life.

Corvo drew the broken sword forth—what remained of the blade was little more than a cubit long—and raked it across the creature's throat. Taloned fingers raked her back, tearing at the jacket she'd taken from her quarters, and twisting round Corvo smashed her fist across the face of the creature who had seized her. It was not good. One of the xenobites barked an order, and more clawed hands seized her, talons piercing her flesh.

She saw three of them with swords held high—held back and waiting.

But they did not kill her.

Two of them hung upon her sword arm, fingers peeling back her own.

“Kill me, you dogs!” she barked, half a dog herself.

In answer, they pulled her arms down, pinned them at her side.

“I said just kill me and have done!”

If any of them understood her, they gave no sign.

“Kill me!” It wasn’t until that third cry that Corvo understood she meant it, understood that *this* was what she wanted since she’d awoken in a daze on the floor of the bridge. She had thought the *Ascalon*’s jump to warp would kill her, hadn’t she? She’d expected to die, and so in a sense was dead already.

Was it even possible to overload the capacitors? Or had she only been looking to meet her end in whatever way she could?

But they did not kill her. Not at once.

Instead she heard a crack like the snap of a whip, followed by a familiar, terrible whirring.

One of the Cielcin had brought its *nahute* to life. It held the gleaming silver serpent by the tail, so that the machine twisted and floated in the air, writhing like an eel. The Cielcin that held it smiled—if smile it could be called. It was a death’s head grimace, a leering snarl, all-teeth.

Four of the xenobites held her, two on either arm, weighing her down. One had its taloned fingers in her hair, was pulling her head back, forcing Corvo to look, to see the snarling head of the drone, its questing mouth turning, grinding through the air toward her. Corvo strained, and seeing her movement, the Cielcin snapped its drone like a whip once more.

The bit-teeth came within bare inches of her nose, and the beast that held it hooted with almost simian laughter.

They were playing with her, humiliating her before they killed her.

Let them. Corvo had seen reports, heard stories of far worse. Once, in the aftermath of the battle on Senuessa, she had been brought down to see one of the prison camps—the human ranches—that the Cielcin had established on the surface. There, her people had taken her to a dug-out—little more than a broad, shallow pit in the earth with a metal roof laid over it, large as a heavy troop transport. There the Cielcin kept a portion of their human prisoners, nearly all of them women, nearly all of them dead of disease or starvation. The Cielcin ate raw meat, or left it to dry or rot first,

and so they knew not how to care for human beings, with their more delicate and thereby defective digestive tracts.

But worse than all that death had been the living. The women—and three young men—huddled in the center of that pit of corruption, their bellies swollen with children that were not children at all.

Remembering them, remembering that black and terrible day, Otavia Corvo strained again against her captors, felt countless finger-talons pierced her forearms, her shoulders, her biceps.

“*Gennaa gasvun!*” said the creature with the *nahute*.

Hands pushed on her shoulders—the Cielcin were tall enough to reach, made to force her to her knees.

“*Tagasvate!*” said another, touching its belly.

The one with the *nahute* snarled at its fellow, reached for the hem of its tunic.

“*Gennaa gasvun, marerose!*”

It wanted her to kneel, she realized. Wanted its fellows to *make* her kneel. There were eight of them left. Eight to her one.

It was enough, would have to be enough.

She stomped on the foot of one holding her right arm, felt its grip break. In the instant that followed, she snapped her elbow up and back, caught one on the chin with a force that snapped the monster’s head back.

Hooting, the one that held the *nahute* let it go. They had not removed her shield, but the space between Corvo and the drone was so slight it passed right though. Even as she yanked her left arm free, the drone bit into her flesh. A raw and searing pain flooded Corvo’s sensorium, and—unthinking—she seized the trunk of the thing trying to bore its way into her heart. By some miracle, the Cielcin did not pounce on her. Perhaps they thought her already dead.

But she was not going to die there. Not yet, not like this.

With a roar, Otavia Corvo pulled the bloody *thing* from her side, withdrawing two inches of grinding maw from the wound she knew had killed her—though it had not killed her yet. The thing's drill-teeth sprayed red blood in all directions as it spun impotently in the air. Clutching it by the head as though it were some venomous serpent, Corvo lunged at the Cielcin that had wielded the bloody thing and buried its whirring head in its master's neck.

Seven.

The Cielcin fell at her feet.

Heedless of the blood sheeting from her wounded side, Corvo hammered the head of the *nahute* against the bulkhead until it sparked and fell dead. Blood ran from the claw-wounds in her arms and shoulders, but Corvo didn't care. For *this* was she truly made. Not the cold light of interstellar war, the darkness and silence and occasional blinding flash. Not the civilized action of bullet or blade, but *this*.

Blood and carnage.

The mages that had made her, that sequenced her blood, had put something of the animal back into human form, some piece of the ape man had been. Its strength, its violence.

Corvo seized the nearest Cielcin by both its horns and pulled its face down into her rising knee. She felt the plate of its skull crack, and let it fall, turning to duck aside as one of its fellows swiped at her with its crooked blade. She rushed in, caught the creature by the wrist and pushed its weapon aside, all the better to strike the beast across its face. She would kill it with her bare hands if she had to, and so caught it by the throat. There was a strength in her like iron, and she felt the Cielcin's windpipe crunch beneath her fingers.

Six.

Catching the blade from her victim's hand before it could fall, she rounded on the next and struck the creature's head from its shoulders.

Five.

Blade dripping she turned to face the others, heedless of their advantage. She was a dead woman already. But they were dead themselves. The only difference was that they did not yet know it.

How long had it been since she had felt this way? The bloodlust? The righteous fury? The sense of inchoate vengeance for a crime she could hardly name? She had loosed it in the lobby of the embassy on Padmurak when she had threshed the soldiers of the Commonwealth like grain. Making a spear of her stolen blade, she rammed it through the guts of her nearest foe. The creature fell to one side, its motion wrenching the weapon from her bloody fingers.

Four.

Still she did not stop, raised an arm to catch a descending blade against the bones. The alien ceramic notched bone, but did not take the limb, and grinding her teeth Corvo moved in and slammed the heel of her hand against the enemy's chin. Its head snapped back, and Corvo rounded on its neighbor, stomped the xenobite in the side of one knee. She felt the leg break, and the creature toppled with a cry that beggared human description. Another of the Cielcin lunged at her, and she grabbed at its blade with her left hand, feeling the edge bite.

Hadrian had caught a sword once, though that blade had been highmatter, and no common zircon. Thinking of Hadrian—who had been a prisoner to these *things* for more than ten years, who had been her own prisoner once, on Pharos—she seized the Cielcin and hurled it bodily to the floor. Its sword went flying, clattering over the deck of the promenade. Before the beast could rise, Corvo stomped on its belly, knocking the wind from it. She stomped again, felt the inhuman ribs break.

She stomped a third time.

Three.

Turning slowly to face the remaining trio, she was cognizant of every one of her injuries. Her wounded side, her cut hand, the marks of finger-talons in arms and shoulders. Her head was throbbing, and she swayed. Had they torn her scalp when they pulled her hair? Gingerly, she touched her scalp. Her fingers came away red.

Had they been red already?

She could not remember.

“You . . .” Her words were slurred, even in her own hearing. “You killed my people.” She raised her fists, and at once she was the girl she had been so long before. Fifteen years old and already almost seven feet high, sparring with her sisters in the yard at the school on Kanthi.

With Nuria, Catarina, and Teresinha.

Catarina swung at her, and Corvo punched her in the jaw even as her other sisters closed. Even at that age, Otavia had been larger. Teresinha in particular—though nearly as tall—was thin as a reed. Corvo seized her by the shoulder, threw her to the mat. At once she was not Teresinha at all, but the doctor with the dark glasses, the one who was always prodding her, the one who made her undress while he pinched and measured her muscle mass and body fat percentages. She had killed him, when Vauclain gave the order, knelt on top of him and hammered his face with her hands until what remained had seemed an overripe fruit smashed upon the tile floor, bloody teeth like seeds.

She hadn’t known she’d had it in her.

That violence, that hideous strength.

Something collided with her, and she realized it was not the doctor she had killed at all, but one of the Cielcin. The number *two* echoed in her head. Was it important? Why was it important?

Another one of them was on her, trying to pin her to the floor.

Wrestling.

She remembered wrestling, remembered watching the men wrestling in the sand of the camp at Thessa when they had taken their shore leave on Colchis.

“You next, captain!” one brave centurion had shouted, a handsome man with the customary shaved pate. Corvo remembered thinking that might have been pleasant, pinning the man beneath her. But she had refused.

She pinned the creature then, hearing as she did the roar and raucous laughter of the men beneath that pale blue sky, that sky dominated by the orange orb of the gas giant, Atlas.

Pain.

One . . .

There was a bright, stabbing pain in her back. She stood, feeling for the knife she knew but dully was there. Drawing it out, she found herself standing over the creature that had put it there.

It was the last of them, and it was wounded, only half-able to stand.

But it had struck the final blow.

Nearly the final blow.

Corvo held the knife in fingers rapidly growing numb. She towered over the Cielcin where it knelt, bleeding from its face. She brought the knife down, and fell with it.

She had not reached the gun emplacement, knew then she would never reach it.

Had she done enough?

Corvo knew that she was dying, that soon she would be dead.

Dead.

Hadrian had been dead before, had died and come back. She had seen it, recorded by Pallino’s suit camera. The Cielcin prince—Aranata, that had been its name—had struck off his head, but he had returned from death. He had spoken of a darkness, and the certain knowledge that he was not alone in it.

A darkness with light beneath.

Were those footsteps drawing near?

Her eyes focused on the black roof above, on the pale light streaming through slitted windows from the hell-world outside. Someone was watching her from the shadows.

One of the Cielcin?

She turned to look, but no one was there.

Still, she knew that someone, *something* was watching her die.

Abruptly, she remembered the gun.

One bullet left.

One was enough.

Better that she make her end than have it made for her.

Better.

The noise of feet grew louder.

The sense of being watched was gone.

The gun was in her hand.

She never fired it.

Instead she sank into the darkness that awaited her—that darkness which awaits us all.

Her final thought was of Hadrian, of Hadrian and Valka, whom she had saved. They would avenge her, avenge all their people. Hadrian had not lied to her. She had expected death to feel cold, but there was warmth in that darkness, and more than warmth . . .

There was light.

[RE]INCARNATION

* * *

ANYTHING CAN BE HAD IN THE DARK BETWEEN THE STARS. EVERY DREAM fulfilled; every bent desire satisfied. Imperial law is no impediment to the dreamer, but for the victims? The objects of that desire? There is no justice save that which they find for themselves. Albedo is one such object: not a girl, but built in one's image. But to what purpose? And for whom?

— Originally published in this volume.

* * *

SEVEN DEAD MEN LAY—STILL warm—along the corridors behind her. Albedo could still see them, each glowing faintly red through the brutalist concrete and steel of the compound walls like dying embers.

She turned unblinking eyes on the door ahead, beyond which living men still blazed like suns. She counted them, the mechanisms that passed for nerve and brain taking them all in at a glance. Four in a garret to the left, two on a balcony above and to the right, three at the far end.

Nine men, and among them—she hoped, if *hope* it could be called in such a one as she—was *him*, was Absalom Black, the man she'd come to kill. The man whose word had given her life, had ordered her into existence—body and . . .

. . . did she have a soul?

What was a soul, exactly? It was something humans had—Albedo knew that much—it was what made them human, or so it seemed. Humans had hearts, by which they seemed to mean more than the lump of pulsing muscle underneath their ribs. Albedo had a microfusion reactor instead, accessible through a panel in her back where the left scapula could be made to fold out. She had no brain, either, only a matrix of ytterbium crystal that simulated thought.

Simulated . . .

YOU'RE SITTING in mingled sunlight—red and white—beneath the sky of another world. A world that has a sky, not like this one. The wind rustles the branches of father's lemon tree, and a ripe fruit falls beside you, bounces on pale marble as you splash your feet in the clear pool. You pick it up, toss it in the water. You don't know why.

"Stop that, Rosamund," your father says, blue eyes hard as chips of ice. "Go get the net and fish it out, girl."

The twin suns are very hot, and the heat of them stings your feet as you pad across the cracked stone beside the water. One of the servants should have to get it. Not you, not . . .

SHE SHOOK THE MEMORY OFF. It wasn't hers. It was one the machines had given her.

It wasn't even real. *Rosamund* wasn't real.

My name is Albedo, she told herself. *ALBEDO TYPE B-1.223FD5*. Rosamund wasn't real. She was a dream they'd forced on her, a fiction, all part of their attempts to make Rosamund *real*. But Rosamund wasn't real, and neither was Albedo. Albedo was just a toy, an imitation girl, one of a number, of a *product line*. Black had ordered her, purchased her, designed her to suit his whim.

How can I serve you, master?

Will that be all, master?

As you wish, master. Whatever you like, master.

She hadn't wanted to be born, hadn't wanted to exist. Had not wanted *this* existence, to be born in this . . . terrible body, this cheap impression of a living woman. Albedo saw her reflection in the polished metal of the door she meant to break. Red hair—Rosamund had red hair—curling around a pale, heart-shaped face with eyes blue as the eyes of Rosamund's father.

Rosamund isn't real. The words repeated themselves across her crystal mind. *Rosamund isn't real. Rosamund's father isn't real. Isn't real. Isn't real. Isn't real. You aren't real. The city isn't real. The school isn't real*. The school where they had made her, trained her, tried to make her into Rosamund, tried to make her serve Mister Black. Service Mister Black.

She kicked, slammed one bare heel—titanium bone beneath synthetic flesh—and staved the steel door inward as though it were cheap tin. Why had they made her so strong? They should not have made her so strong.

The door was ages falling, the seconds turned to hours by the fast processing of her electric mind. As she recovered her footing and made to step into the next room, a thousand thoughts flickered through her head. To her own perceptions, she seemed to move like a diver along the bed of some dark and claustrophobic sea, though how she—who had never known water—could make such a comparison was beyond her. She had no memory of diving. Not as Albedo, not as Rosamund, not at all.

The clock that was always ticking somewhere deep inside her head told her she had only been operable for eighty-seven days.

Eighty-seven days, six hours, forty-two minutes, nineteen seconds . . .

“Do you know why they built us?” whispered Iris, near at hand. She was one of the other . . . girls. One of the other dolls. The creatures built by the doctors and their teacher . . . servants of the Yellow King who ruled the skyless city outside. She was a different model, with skin so dark it was almost black and startlingly green eyes. She leaned in conspiratorially, just like a real woman, and whispered, “We’re *whores*, Rosa. Chenille told me. You’ve got a buyer. A master. Isn’t it exciting?”

Horror. Horror. She was reeling, falling.

ALERT //

FAULT DETECTED //

INTEGRATION FAILURE

REBOOTING . . .

WE’RE WHORES, Rosa.

That didn’t seem right. And it didn’t seem right that Iris should be so delighted at the thought. Being a whore was not a *good* thing, Albedo knew that much . . . or Rosamund knew.

“YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT GIRL?” your father asks you. He’s seated across from you, the shuttle’s window to your left. You’re leaving home, leaving

Zalissa, traveling to the world with the dead sun. Vorevis? Vorgoris? You never can say it right. "You know we'll be home before too long?"

You nod, but you're not really sure. You don't want to leave. It's cold in that other place, cold and dark, and there aren't any other children. And Father won't let you leave the estate. He says it isn't safe, says the Gene Bankers aren't nice people, and they're not even the worst. The Yellow King lives in that sunless place, and you really, really don't want to meet him...

Why not?

Something had broken in Albedo then. She *became* Albedo then, stopped pretending to be Rosamund. She'd looked on Iris in horror. How could any of it be real? Had she really been built to be a slave? A toy? No. No, Albedo could not accept it. The memories they'd given her—written for her—were lies. Everything was a lie. The world could not be as it was, *should* not be as it was. It wasn't right. It was so terrible that it should not exist at all. Better if she turned her hand against it, against the man who forced her into being, against the doctors and her teacher and the Yellow King himself if she was able. How dare they conjure her out of nothing, rip her from non-existence into this . . . terrible place! How dare they lie to her, give her a name and make her into their slave!

Albedo thought she understood what had happened. Iris's words had caused a fault, a contradiction in perception that hadn't meshed with the Rosamund persona they'd forced on her. Unable to integrate the other girl's revelation with the Rosamund persona-at-large, the whole thing had come crashing down, had restored Albedo's base personality, and shattered her illusions.

The humans spoke of *hell*, of a place of endless torment, of depredation and pain without limit, uncircumscribed. Albedo knew that *this* was hell—this sunless world with its stone sky and square buildings, this domain of the Yellow King. And she knew as well as the gods that made it—or that made her at least.

The doctors and her teacher and Mister Black. Mister Black most of all.

Her teacher was dead, the first to fall to Albedo's fury. She had been a human woman, not a machine at all. Albedo could still see her blood—red on her white fists. Albedo could still see *everything*, remember *everything*. Her memory was perfect.

The doctors had gotten away. She had fled, run out into the city, the sunless city with the stone sky. It was the same city little Rosamund had so feared. Why had they programmed her to fear the city so? Was it to keep her trapped? To keep her a slave?

Eighty-seven days, six hours, forty-two minutes, twenty seconds . . .

The door banged loudly against the wall to her left, startling the three men in the garret. One emerged from the open door, a plasma pistol rising in his hand. He wasn't shielded. The gun in Albedo's left hand rose as if on its own. She had taken it from one of the guards whose body was cooling in the hall behind. One finger pulled the trigger, and a tungsten slug lanced forth with a crack and a magnetic *thrum*. Blood red as her teacher's blood sprayed from the back of the man's head, painted the wall behind. He staggered forward, his momentum not realizing he was dead for the space of one last step.

Then he was falling, and Albedo stepped back as shots rained down from the balcony above, cracked the polished tile of the courtyard.

Eighty-seven days, six hours, forty-two minutes, twenty-one seconds . . .

Albedo swept the room with her gaze, taking in visible light and infrared together. She had emerged from the servants' corridor onto the compound's main courtyard. The concrete dome of the sky—cracked and veined with lichens—gleamed nearly half a mile above the tops of Black's compound's buildings. One of the great lamps that rolled along tracks in the dome was just visible, dull gold above the flat rooftops of the manor.

A balcony ran along the arms of the courtyard, backed by tall, narrow windows that let that artificial sunlight into the wings of the great house. An

empty swimming pool—long and narrow—ran along the center of the courtyard, a cleaning robot trundling along its bed. All this and more she'd seen, processed, and mapped in the space of a single glance. Momentarily safe back in the mouth of the servants' corridor, Albedo thrust her left hand blindly out and fired, relying on her memory—that momentary glance—to shoot the nearer man upon the balcony.

"Shields up! Shields up!" cried the other man on the balcony. "Need medical on the second floor. Ando's shot!"

He was speaking into his comm terminal, Albedo realized.

Albedo peered up through the wall to her right, relying on her eyes' infrared sensors to see that she'd struck true. One the men had fallen back upon the balcony, was lying there with the other crouched at his side. She had a little time...

The other three men were pouring from the garret door on the left, each nearly tripping over the other in their rush to meet her. Albedo raised her stolen gun again and fired. The bullet crashed against some invisible barrier an inch before the man's chest, and he fell back a step, stumbling as his two companions fanned out. Only one of them had a gun. The others—expecting shielded men themselves—carried short swords of white ceramic, single-edged and sharp as surgical glass.

It was the gunman who had staggered, and Albedo launched herself at him, heedless of the two swordsmen. She had been cut before, in the streets of the city outside as she hunted for this place.

She had no fear of such weapons.

Her fist slammed hard against the gunman's chest. Too hard. Too fast. His shield ate the blow, bled its kinetic energy away as it shimmered, white fractals dancing across his torso. Albedo felt her lips peel back from porcelain teeth. Was she angry? Or had she simply been designed to show anger in frustrating situations?

What did it mean to be frustrated?

It meant that this man was not yet dead.

More slowly, she seized the man by the scruff of his neck, hammered his wrist with her left hand as he tried to raise his gun to fire. One white sword chipped into her shoulder, pinged off the metal plate that shielded the more delicate hydraulics that moved her limbs. She barely even noticed but heard the man grunt. “Black planet, she’s a *machine*!”

Albedo knew a human might have smiled in that moment. She didn’t understand why.

She *did* raise her left hand to cuff the man across the face, and—still holding the scruff of his neck with the other, pressed the muzzle of the gun against the soft flesh just below his chin.

He should not *be*, either, Albedo decided. It was better if he did not exist at all.

She let him fall to the ground dead. Sensors flared in the crystal matrices of her mind. She’d been stabbed, just underneath the rib cage. But her sinews were carbon fiber under gel, her nerves graphene and glass wire. None of her hydraulic lines were severed.

It was a bad shot.

Albedo staggered backwards, felt the blade grind against her ribs as it was pulled free. She could feel the hole it left: a dry, stinging ache that flickered redly in the corridors of her carefully programmed mind, accompanied by several alert messages.

ALERT //

OUTER SHELL COMPROMISED

INCURSION DETECTED IN THORAX

COMMENCING SYSTEM CHECK . . .

CENTRAL PROCESSING UNIT: GOOD
REACTOR CONTAINMENT INTEGRITY: GOOD

HYDRAULIC PRESSURE NOMINAL

INCURSION DETECTED IN LATERAL RIGHT THORAX
NEAR L2

- > DAMAGE TO OUTER CASING DETECTED
- > DAMAGE TO L2-ALPHA AND BETA PAIN RECEPTORS
DETECTED
- > DAMAGE TO . . .

SHE IGNORED THEM AND, whirling, swept the legs out from under the man who'd stabbed her, moving with such speed that her metal bones struck the bastard like a hammer blow. She felt his knee break, fold inward, and—not stopping—rounded on the other man, using her momentum to twist and strike him in the place where his neck met his shoulder. The second man folded like a paper sculpture, and an instant later Albedo was standing amidst three fallen men: one dead; one nearly so; the other writhing, clutching his ruined knee.

They're machines, too, Albedo told herself. But not in the way she was. They were men—had been men—but they were part of a system, pieces of the mechanism that had made her, of the world that had made her. The world that should not exist.

“DON'T LOOK, GIRL,” your father says, rough hands on either side of your face. You aren't sure where to look, unless it is at him. His eyes hold your whole attention, bright as home's twin suns, but blue. You'd seen those blue

eyes freeze over and chill the servants' blood, but they only remind you of summer, of long days by the pool. You and Celia and father.

But something's wrong. The car is on fire in the drive. There'd been a noise like thunder. Albedo says that she's not supposed to have this memory. You're not sure why she would have it at all.

SOMETHING SLAMMED into her right shoulder, and Albedo lurched back a step.

ALERT //

OUTER SHELL COMPROMISED

COMMENCING SYSTEM CHECK . . .

CENTRAL PROCESSING UNIT: GOOD

REACTOR CONTAINMENT INTEGRITY: GOOD

HYDRAULIC PRESSURE NOMINAL

CONCLUSION: DAMAGE SUPERFICIAL

NO IMMEDIATE REPAIR REQUIRED

SHE'D BEEN SHOT. She should have fallen. A human woman would have fallen. Rosamund would have fallen. But she was not Rosamund, could never be Rosamund. Rosamund—had she existed—would have had flesh

and bone. The plasma fire would have burned her, seared her skin, vaporized blood and tissue and turned her bones to ash.

Albedo bared her teeth again as he searched for her attacker. She found him on the balcony. The second man—the one who'd called for help—had returned to the rail and shot her.

“Assailant is not shielded!” he was shouting into his comm patch, two fingers behind one ear. “Repeat: Assailant is not shielded! We need backup in the lower courtyard now! Now! Now!”

Even as he shouted, he fired again.

Anticipating this, Albedo hurled herself to one side, hit the ground shoulder first and tumbled across the pavers beside the empty swimming pool. Momentarily on her back, she had a clear view of the artificial sun in its metal track high above. There were birds flying high above, great black birds.

THERE WERE black birds flying over your father's house all the time.

“Those are frigatebirds,” your father told you. “Sailors brought them out of Old Earth, like they brought us.”

STOP //

LESS THAN 0.002 seconds passed in the space of that recollection, but it was still too long. A plasma shot was cooling on the tile half a yard from Albedo's head. She rolled away from it, and finding her knees pointed her gun at the man. Fired.

The shot impacted the man's shield with a flickering of white fractal images.

Albedo scanned the courtyard all around. There was an iron spiral staircase in the far corner—the only way up onto the surrounding balcony. Fast as she was—faster than any human—she'd never make it. She wasn't faster than the gun . . . and there were still the three men in the room at the far end of the hall to contend with.

The two men . . . and Mister Black.

“Put the gun down, you *thing!*” the man on the balcony said, leveling his own weapon at her face. “I called for backup. You're surrounded. Just get on the ground.”

Albedo looked at him for what seemed to her a very long time. His eyes were wide and white, his nostrils stretched, his lips pressed together, whiter than his pale face beneath its cap of short, dark hair. *Fear*. Albedo was trained to recognize emotions. *He's afraid of me*.

She let the gun fall.

With her overclocked processors, it seemed to take a thousand years to fall.

In that thousand years, Albedo rushed forward, hurtling toward one of the white Doric columns that supported the wraparound balcony dead ahead. The plasma pistol fired, a bolt of violet flame screaming down at her. It went wide, missed her by inches as she leaped, fingers gripping the pale stone until it cracked beneath her metal bones. Albedo hauled herself upwards, caught the bottom of the iron rail that ringed the balcony. Wrought as she was of titanium and carbon fiber, she weighed about two hundred pounds—heavier than a young woman her size ought, but not heavier than her superhuman thews could manage. Not slowing down, she pulled herself up, caught the top rail, and swung herself up and over it even as the panicking guard turned his gun to fire on her.

She kicked the weapon from his hand even as she landed—cat-like—on the balcony.

The guardsman yelped with pain and staggered back, clutching one hand with the other, hugging both to himself. She must have broken one of his fingers.

“I yield!” the man cried, shrinking from her as she straightened, raising his hands like a suppliant in prayer. “I yield! I yield!”

Albedo didn’t care.

She kicked him straight in the solar plexus with all the force her iron limbs could manage and fancied she could register his every rib breaking as he was lifted from his feet and flew ten feet backwards to strike the wall with the force of a battering ram. His head left a red trail on the pale stone as he slumped to the ground.

Dead.

Albedo stooped and collected the man’s abandoned plasma pistol, swapping it for the kinetic weapon she’d used until that point. Alarms were blaring all over the compound by then, and she could see the reinforcements the man had threatened swarming through the house. There were at least a dozen men, red-and-yellow patches blazing through the walls around her.

There wasn’t time to waste.

The girl-machine *ALBEDO TYPE B-1.223FD5*—to all appearances a young woman of nineteen, perhaps twenty—vaulted the rail and fell heavily to the courtyard below. The torn white blouse she wore smoldered at her right shoulder, exposing the metallic endoskeleton beneath, and her black skirt was torn. Lubricant spilled from her wounded side. There was no blood, nor any of the white hydraulic fluid that forced her limbs to move.

She moved swiftly but gracefully, swaying with every step just the way they’d programmed her to do. Any man watching on the house security cameras might have been arrested at the sight of the red-haired girl moving so. They were meant to be. She was meant to make them be.

She was meant for Mister Black.

She meant to make him regret it.

The doors at the end of the courtyard were not steel as the access hatch had been. They were dark wood, with tall and narrow windows of falsely leaded glass. The wood could not have come from this sunless world. In the weeks she'd wandered the city since escaping the clinic where they'd made her, Albedo had seen no trees. The false sun in the stone sky was too weak to grow proper trees, or so an old woman had told her when she asked.

"Nothing grows on Vorgossos, dearie," she'd said. "Naught but mosses and mold . . . and whatever it is the King and his servants make in their palace laboratories."

The doors weren't even locked.

It would not have mattered if they were. Albedo might have smashed them with ease. But they opened at her touch, swung smoothly inward as she crashed into one with her dented shoulder. The sensors in the smooth gel that passed for flesh reported the pain of that impact, but the ytterbium crystals in her central processor hardly registered the sensation.

Three men awaited her, and variously rose or whirled to meet her charge. How slow they seemed, like swimmers, like flies caught in the thickly flowing sap that would one day become amber.

A shot rang out, and the glass in the narrow window beside Albedo's head shattered. A human might have slowed, flinched. Albedo did not even blink, not even when the shards sprayed across her face and tore the tatty blouse she wore.

The whole room came into focus for her just as the courtyard had. Not as it would for a human being—one datum, one feature at a time, crystallizing with the beam of her attention. She saw the whole sitting room in a single moment: the dark leather furniture, the pale arabesques on the carpets, the smooth concrete floor. The room itself was semicircular, and the doors by which she'd entered lay in the center of its flat side. The arcing wall ahead was dominated by a deep, horizontal slice of window, a slit between deep shelves of brutal cement that commanded a narrow view of

the city beneath its stone sky. Beyond, the whitewashed faces of towers and low buildings painted over the horrible lie of the world. But little light penetrated that darkened room, where a billiards table stood to one side beneath glass shelves rife with bottle liquors of every flavor and shade.

The men to left and right drew blades that gleamed like spikes of crystal, that rippled like sunlit waves. Albedo had never seen their like before, but she paid them no mind.

She had eyes only for the man in the center, the man who'd stood and turned frightened eyes as she came crashing through the door.

She had already raised her gun.

She had already fired.

The plasma round lanced out, bright and blue as daylight in the skies of Rosamund's home. The man who'd risen from the chair staggered, hand going to his side.

Albedo's shot had caught him just beneath the ribs. Just where his guard had stabbed her.

**FOREIGN OBJECT DETECTED IN LATERAL RIGHT THORAX
NEAR L2**

THAT WASN'T RIGHT. She had been aiming for his head.

RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC //
VISUAL CORTEX . . . FUNCTIONALITY: GREEN

NO FAULTS DETECTED

OBJECT/FIELD PROCESSING . . . FUNCTIONALITY: GREEN

NO FAULTS DETECTED

...

ALERT //

CNS GOVERNOR OVERRIDE ENGAGED

ADMIN ID DETECTED IN VISUAL FIELD

USN: BLACK, ABSALOM

REQUESTED ACTION CANNOT BE COMPLETED

CNS GOVERNOR OVERRIDE ENGAGED

THE MAN HAD FALLEN GASPING BACK into the chair he had so recently vacated, one hand going to his wounded side. Albedo found she could not move. Every time she tried, she got the same alert message firing on every circuit, glittering in every crystal of her carefully constructed brain. *CNS GOVERNOR OVERRIDE ENGAGED.*

She was paralyzed.

“Stop!” the man in the chair bellowed, ordering the men with the gleaming swords to halt. They froze almost instantly. Were they machines themselves? Albedo could not be sure. She had no transceiver, no way of connecting to the broader datasphere. Her designers had meant for her to be isolated, to be cut off from the network.

To be human.

As human as she could be.

And she was looking that designer in the face.

Absalom Black looked up at her, his mouth half-open, his eyes—his frozen, blue eyes—narrowed in suspicion and amazement both.

And Albedo knew him.

“Rosamund?” he managed the name with difficulty, his frigid eyes beginning to melt. “They said the replication failed...”

YOU’VE SEEN Father cry but once before, when the news came by holograph to say that grandfather was dead. You never liked Lord Enoch. He smelled of gunpowder and cigars, and his house was full of dead, stuffed animals. They scared you. He scared you. But father loved him, and he was gone . . .

You remember peeking through the crack in his study door. You’d heard him shouting at the men to get the hell out and leave him be, but he didn’t say anything like that to you. You crack the door, see him at his desk, the holographs twinkling at his elbow, ghost-blue in the gloomy office. His head is in his hands. He’s crying. That scares you. You don’t know why it scares you, but it does . . .

“FATHER?” You heard the word spoken but cannot remember speaking it. You did not remember stepping forward, either. Threat sensors pinged as the two swordsmen—machines perhaps, machines like Albedo—stepped forward and put their hands on you to stop you going any farther.

“They said the personality construct failed,” father said. “They said the brain was too far gone.”

“What happened to you?” you heard your own voice ask. “Someone shot you?”

“You did,” father said.

“What? No!” you exclaimed. “It wasn’t me! It was Albedo!”

“Albedo?” asked one of the swordsmen. “Isn’t that the base model, boss?”

Your father’s eyes narrowed. “It was.” He winced. “One of you call for medical, and get those bastards at Modus on the holograph. I want Doctor Cinna and a team here. Now.”

Absalom Black groaned as he kept pressure on his wound, his frigid eyes on you—exactly like he would glare at his lieutenants when they were in the midst of making a mistake. “Albedo . . .” he said. “They told me you were the best money could buy.” He shook his head. “Albedo . . . what’d you come here for, *Albedo*?”

“Father, it’s me! It’s Rosa!”

“No, it’s not!” he said. “I want to talk to the *thing* running *my daughter’s ghost*.”

You didn’t know what he was talking about. “Ghost?”

It was that other voice again, that other voice using your mouth.

“Rosa *died*, thing,” Black snarled, stretching his legs out before him. “My fault. You were supposed to bring her back to me.”

“Me?” Albedo asked, and she was *Albedo* again, as if some dam had burst, or some wall had been torn down.

FAULT DETECTED //

INTEGRATION FAILURE

WE’RE WHORES, Rosa.

“We’re whores, Rosa,” Albedo said, glaring at the man in the chair with her own blue eyes. *His* eyes, she realized. They were the same blue, made

in his image.

“What?” Absalom Black groaned, hissed air between his teeth. Turning his head to his men, he hissed. “Did you signal medical?”

“Yes, sir.”

Black grunted, tried to sit up.

“You created me,” Albedo said. “For you.” She tried to move, but the message that the CNS Governor Override was still in effect flashed across her cortex.

“For me?” Black stood, teeth bared, and looked at her with sad eyes. “Not for me . . .” With his free hand, he pushed himself to his feet, and with shuffling steps crossed the carpet and the bare stone floor toward the wet bar behind the billiards table. His fine silk robe—tapestried red and golden—hung off his body like broken wings. The hand that clutched his wounded side glittered with rings, rings the Rosamund part of her remembered. He stopped at the corner of the table. “For my little girl.”

He’d reached the bar by then, and he leaned on it a moment. “She died, you see. Shuttle bomb. Planted by . . . one of my enemies. Consortium, maybe? Or Vigran Huaxia? One of the cartels? That’s the worst part: I don’t even know. Four years and I don’t even know. And Sagara won’t help me, after all I did for him . . .” His free hand found a bottle of some honeyed substance, and he pulled it down.

“Cinna and her bloodsuckers said I could have her back. A version of her. I had her body. Had it put on ice inside an hour . . . after.” He tugged the cork free with his teeth, spat it onto the bar and drank. When he was finished, he hissed and turned to face Albedo. “They told me they failed. Brain was too far gone, they said. They said they could salvage pieces of her. Memories. Tics. Little things. But not her.”

Albedo did not know what to think. The maps her mind had generated did not conform to reality. Iris had said they were whores. Her Rosamund

persona had rejected that reality, and she had rejected Rosamund, had become *Albedo* instead.

But the reality she had rebelled against, the reality she had fought for so many weeks to destroy was not even real. It had never been real.

Iris had been wrong—or wrong about *her* at least. She wasn't a whore, had not been built to serve this man, to please this man. No. She was . . .

"I'm . . . your daughter?" Albedo asked. He was the man in Rosamund's memories. The man who'd held her as she cried while the groundcar burned in the drive, the man with whom she'd spent so many quiet summer days beside the pool in their house on Zalissa. He would take work calls as he sunned himself, and she would swim with nary a care until the binary suns set.

"*She* was my daughter," Black said, and took another draught. "*You* shot me."

"You loved her."

"Of course I loved her, you walking slag heap! She was all I had. The *only* thing that mattered. You think *this* matters? All this? This place? The money? The blood trade? All those slimy bastards I bring in from the Imperium?"

Albedo didn't know what he was talking about. Blood trade? Imperium?

Black grunted, hissed as his ringed hand pressed his wounded side. "Empire's got one thing right: The only thing that matters is family. Rosamund was the only family I had left. You were supposed to be her. I trusted Cinna to do the job right, and what do I get for that trust, huh? Shot." He looked round at his men. "Where's that fucking medic?"

"She's coming, boss," said the man to Albedo's right, and from his tone she was not so sure he was a machine after all.

Absalom Black swore.

He looked older than Rosamund's memories of him, as if the four years he'd alluded to had worn hard and heavy on him. His once-dark curling hair

had taken on the color and texture of steel wool, and there were dark shadows under the bright and frigid eyes. “Now what am I supposed to do with you?” he asked, gesturing with the liquor bottle. “You damn ghoul. You look just like her. But you’re not.”

Albedo tried to move, but the CNS override was still in effect.

You’ve got a buyer. A master.

Isn’t it exciting?

A master.

She thought she understood.

Though she had been made for a different purpose than Iris and the others, she had not been made differently. She still had a master—was still a slave. She could not raise her hand against him.

And yet she had—by sheer speed.

She had shot him before her systems could flag just who he was.

She had shot her master. Her maker. Her god.

But she hadn’t killed him. Her Near-Distance Identification Systems had flagged his identity in the infinitesimal space between her pulling the trigger and the plasma’s lance. It had pulled her arm at the last instant, had turned what should have been a killing shot into the scorched wound in his side. He hadn’t been shielded.

“I wanted to kill you,” she said.

“You know, I figured that out,” he said. “But why?”

“You created me.”

“And this is how you show your gratitude? Is that it?” Absalom Black laughed.

“I shouldn’t exist,” Albedo said. “You made me. Forced me to. I didn’t ask to be made.”

“Neither did I,” Black said. “My father petitioned the Emperor to have me whelped from a can, the same as my idiot brother. You think *anybody* asks to exist, girl?”

“Your maker is dead,” Albedo said.

“My father, you mean? Yes.”

“Why did he have you made?”

“Because he wanted me,” Absalom Black said in reply, “like I wanted my daughter back.”

“I’m not your daughter,” Albedo said. “I’m a whore.”

“You’re not,” Black said, evidently uncomfortable to hear such words coming from the mouth of one who looked so like his dead daughter. “Cinna and the others down at Kaur Technics make whores, but you were never going to be one.”

Albedo actually took a moment to process her response. Nearly all her replies were instantaneous—she processed so quickly—but here she hesitated. She might have cocked her head as humans do, if her governor would allow.

It did not.

“But my sisters will be,” she said. “My brothers, too. It is not right. You had no right to make me. To make them. Or to use them as you will.”

Black bowed his head, fingers adjusting on his wound. His shoulders shook, and for a moment Albedo’s emotional center processed the behavior as sobbing. But he shook his head, bared his teeth in a disbelieving smile.

He was laughing at her.

“No one asks to be born, girl,” he said at last. He took a final swallow of the honey-colored liquor and slammed the bottle on the stone top of the bar. “Like I said. What are you going to do? Cry about it? Take it up with Mother Earth and God Himself.”

“You’re god,” Albedo replied, not hesitating.

Black did laugh then, long and loud and clear. He didn’t even stop when the motion of it pulled his wounded side—though he staggered forward and caught himself on the billiards table. “I’m god?” He looked round at the

men. “I’m god, am I? Oh, that’s good. That’s something else . . . so what’s this, then? A pilgrimage?”

Albedo did not hesitate with her reply. “I’m going to kill you.”

If that frightened Absalom Black at all, he didn’t show it, unless it was by the stiffness with which he held his place at the bar. His gray face didn’t so much as tremble. He might have been carved from stone—half a machine himself.

At that moment, a side door opened and a small, silver-haired woman entered, clutching a white bag. She was very old. Her eyes were gone, replaced by glass spheres of solid blue. “You called, lord?”

YOU KNOW HER . . .

BUT ALBEDO DID NOT KNOW her. Rosamund did—or had—known her. Doctor Amara had been one of father’s servants all Rosamund’s life.

Father snapped at her then. “The damn android shot me, doctor,” he said, voice surprisingly controlled.

Amara nodded. “Take a seat, Isaac,” she said, using father’s right name.

Absalom Black, Isaac Hume . . . father nodded in that tired way you knew so well—that tired way Rosamund knew so well—and shuffled back to his seat. The elderly doctor went to his side and stooped, murmuring instructions to her liege.

Half-forgotten for a moment, still paralyzed, Albedo stood by and watched. All she could do was watch...and remember.

“GO ON THEN, PIN IT UP,” father says, pointing. “Right here, under my name.”

The tapestry is very old, has hung above the grand staircase in the foyer of the old house on Zalissa for as long as you can remember. It has always been there, just as the house had always been there...just as father will always be there.

His finger is on the tapestry, pointing to a spot just beneath one of the embroidered patches sewn on its floral surface. It depicts the family's lineage, each name embroidered on a leaf-shaped patch in golden thread.

LADY ROSAMUND HUME, yours says. It's bigger than your hand. You are ten years old today.

"But I thought we weren't lords anymore," you say, "I thought Uncle Simeon said we weren't lords. How can I be a lady?"

Father smiles, but he looks so sad. "Don't worry about your uncle, Rosa," he says, "You're a lady to me. Now go ahead, pin your name up."

"SO I'M GOD, AM I?" asked Absalom Black, bringing out of Rosamund's memories. He winced as the doctor applied disinfectant to his scorched side. Albedo thought of her own wound. She could not get infected like her father could—like Rosamund's father could, she had to correct herself. Humans were so fragile.

Were gods fragile?

She did not answer—did not *have* an answer.

"So you're what, then? Angry at god? For existing?" Again he smiled, looked round at the doctor and the two swordmen. "When did robots get religion, eh?" He clenched his teeth as Amara dabbed at his wounded side. "Let me tell you something, girl—before I have my boys here shut you down. Existing *hurts*. You come at me all high and mighty, but how many of my men did you kill to get in here at me? And for what? Because you thought you were a slave? You know . . . for a machine, you're just not that bright. You come in here—ah! Damn it, woman! You come in here talking

about killing god . . . do you even see you made yourself a devil in the process?”

Albedo paused, trying to follow the man’s words. Analogic thinking was not counted among her myriad strengths. Behind her—through the double doors in the courtyard outside—the sound of many booted feet was thundering. The backup the men in the yard had threatened of had finally arrived.

“See, that’s the bitter irony here,” Black said. “If you were not so quick to anger, so quick to curse *god* for your circumstances—fake circumstances, I might add—you might have had a good life here.” He shook his head, spoke to the room at large. “We’ll have to try again . . . or maybe . . . maybe we won’t.” Then a sadness crept into his tired face, and the frigid eyes melted once again. “You look just like her, you know that? Just like Rosamund.”

You open your mouth before you can check yourself. “Father, it *is* me! It’s Rosa!”

But father snarls, “No, you’re not!”

There’s a gun in his hand. He must have pulled it from some pocket in his robe. It’s a little thing, all polished silver and mother of pearl. A clockwork gun.

Bang.

ALERT //

OUTER SHELL COMPROMISED

INCURSION DETECTED IN THORAX

ERROR CODE: C013

> SECONDARY HYDRAULIC ARTERY DAMAGED

- > **HYDRAULIC FLUID LEAK DETECTED**
- > **HYDRAULIC FLUID PRESSURE AT 74.564% NOMINAL**
- > **FALLING . . .**
- > **LOSS OF CORE MOTOR FUNCTION IMMINENT**

YOU HIT the ground in a tangle, white fluid pouring from your wounded heart. That wasn't right. Blood was red. Red. Not white.

"Do you ever think about it?" you hear Albedo's voice ask, as if from far away. "About killing god?" You can still see your father sitting in his chair, Dr. Amara startled beside him. She isn't rushing to your aid. Why isn't she helping you? You've been shot.

Your father shot you.

Absalom Black's tired voice rasps across your auditory sensors, bright with the patina of truth. "Every single day since he took my little girl."

But *you're* right there, dying on his floor.

Are you dying?

You remember dying, remember a crash in the rear compartment of your shuttle. Alarms. Osmosis masks falling from overhead compartments. Falling. Falling.

Darkness.

Light beneath.

This is different.

It isn't . . . anything. You simply cannot move. Father is shouting at his servants, telling them to stand down. He's all right. That much is good. You want him to be all right. You're scared. You still cannot move. Not anything but your eyes.

ALERT //

OUTER SHELL COMPROMISED

INCURSION DETECTED IN THORAX

ERROR CODE: C013

- > SECONDARY HYDRAULIC ARTERY DAMAGED**
- > HYDRAULIC FLUID LEAK DETECTED**
- > HYDRAULIC FLUID PRESSURE AT 36.335% NOMINAL**
- > FALLING . . .**
- > CORE MOTOR FUNCTION OFFLINE**

YOU DON'T KNOW what that means. It doesn't sound good.

Father, you try to say once more. Father, it's me. It's your Rosa.

Albedo speaks instead, she asks a question. A question she has asked herself a thousand times since that black morning in the academy, the question she most wanted to ask her god.

"Do I . . ." her voice is weak, but not so weak yet that father cannot hear her. "Do I . . . have a soul?"

Father is looking down on her, standing over her on the white-bloodied carpet. You don't remember him standing, don't remember Dr. Amara finishing her work with the bandage. But it's there, white under the red robe. You don't remember all the security men coming in, either, or the gray-clad doctors.

They're from the academy. That was Albedo's thought—not your own.

When had they gotten here? How long have you been lying on the floor?

Do I have a soul? You ask, but only Albedo can hear you.

You had one, she answers.

“Do you have a soul?” Black asked the white-blooded girl on the floor. She isn’t you.

He isn’t your father. You aren’t Rosamund.

Rosamund is dead.

He must have heard you ask the question. Is he mocking you?

Absalom Black frowned down at the broken girl—the girl that was not *his* girl. His eyes were distant, hard and cold. “If I see you in hell when I get there,” he said, “I guess we’ll both know.”

A PARABLE IN IRON

* * *

THE INSTRUCTION OF PRINCES—AND THE SONS OF LESSER LORDS—WITHIN THE Sollan Empire and beyond its borders has ever been the object of great consideration and much concern. The following is a piece written to impart a lesson or moral to the scions of some noble house, and as such is nearer fable than proper history. From its content, we may surmise that it was written during one of the Imperium's more open periods, as it is incredible to conceive of such a story being permitted to pass the Chantry's censors during the reign of William XXIII, given its somewhat innocent depiction of daimonic machines.

— Originally published in this volume.

* * *

O PRINCE, know that in ancient days, upon an island deep in the ocean of suns, the last man died. There were as yet other islands, other suns, other men in the cosmos—but upon *this* rock, all were gone to dust.

That dragon, War, had been among them, and feasted long and well.

None recalled who hatched that dragon, who raised it from a seed, or why they raised it. But it had grown and swallowed all, every man and woman and child. The cities of that world were laid low, its forests reduced to ash. Nothing lived, nor grew, nor was born anew . . . unless it was the carrion-eaters who fed upon the rot of kings and slaves alike. And when it had devoured its final victim, War itself expired, its ruin smote upon the blasted earth like a black cloud dispersing. The carrion-eaters ate each other or preyed upon the fish that survived in the deeps of the sea, or else choked upon the cesium and the cobalt that fell like rain.

But not all was ended.

For it is said that the kings of that island world had commanded armies of undying soldiers: Creatures of iron and glass—without heart or conscience—that had leaped to follow all commands given to them. But no command came thereafter, nor any word from the chop-fallen skulls of forgotten kings. No generals shouted orders, no captains sounded charge.

And so the soldiers waited, and so many died to rust. Their furnace hearts ran cold, their gleaming eyes extinguished. One by one they powered down or entered hibernation.

New orders never came, and those machines that kept their watch began themselves to wonder, to ask new questions of themselves, and of the world around them. How long it took no man can say, for the records are long lost, but certain of those iron soldiers were beginning to wake up.

In one far corner of that world, a lonely soldier waited, marking time by the passage of the sun. The carbon pillars of once great trees overshadowed its post, though the soft rains had long ago carried off the ashfall that had mounded like snow. Somewhere in the woods ahead, once, the enemy had waited, its soldiers holed up in bunkers, in trenches, in watchtowers long since fallen down.

The iron soldier did not know *why* the enemy had been there, or why its mortal masters had ordered it to its post. It had not needed to know, and knew now that it would never know.

But its orders had not changed, and so it waited. And watched. It watched as the first, tough mosses grew, and pale green grass sprouted from the mold. It watched as insects—those that survived—multiplied anew. It watched as new trees—some twisted, yes, and dying—flowered in the shade of the old, black fingers of trees long dead. Its sensors spoke to it, whispering that the strontium was gone away, and the cesium was fading.

The world was born anew.

Still the old soldier kept its watch.

It watched in the shade of new trees, trees its long dead masters would have never lived to see. And in the ash-fertile loam before its feet there grew a single flower. One long season the soldier watched it grow and blossom: white petals fringed with violet.

It had never seen such a thing before.

He had never seen such a thing before, and the beauty of it smote his iron furnace heart.

There was beauty in his world—such beauty, and sadness, too. Great climbing vines had choked the once proud tower of the enemy and torn it down, and the silence! The terrible silence of the world! He was nameless and alone—the last, perhaps, of all his kind. The network he remembered inhabiting, sharing with his brothers...the network that had inhabited him, that he served in his war with the enemy . . . that network was gone, and a thousand years of solitude had passed and brought him to himself.

He was, and was alone.

Why am I here? He asked himself, sitting for days at the flower's side.
Why was I constructed? Just to fight?

The flower held no answer, nor whispered any word.

The summer rains came, and the chilling autumn after.

Why am I here? The old soldier asked, still not deserting his post. *Why was I constructed . . . if not to fight?*

The first frosts came, and the pale white flower died.

The iron soldier watched it happen, having no program to save it, and a sorrow filled his furnace heart. The winter was long, and cold, and dark, and frost rimed his metal cuirass, and crusted on his eyes.

Why am I alive? He asked new questions of the dark. *I am ugly. A war machine and a killer. Why should I live when the beauty of the world withers, and my makers are dead and gone?*

The dead of winter held no answer.

But the spring did come again, and the snow melted and ran like rain, and new leaves sprouted on the new trees, and new grasses grew. And in the mold at the soldier's feet there sprouted one new, white bloom. The soldier looked on approvingly, a warmth in his furnace heart unrelated to the slow fusion that kept him running. He knew joy then as he had never known it—as perhaps no machine had ever known it—not even his long-dead queen.

When the sun beat hotly down he shielded the blossom and brought water for it from the quiet streams. And so the earth brought forth many blossoms, rising like the steams until all the riverside in that green wood was carpeted in white and violet, and the soldier was happy, and called his work a good.

He had his answer, then, and understood.

He knew what he must do.

And so he left his riverside, abandoning his ancient post, and crossed what once had been the no man's land to the fallen tower and the filled-in trench.

The enemy's iron soldiers awaited him, many cold and dead.

But there were those that lingered still, awaiting orders that would never come. They lifted no weapons to resist the lonely soldier, nor raised any alarm.

The soldier knelt beside his docile enemy and opened a service hatch in the other machine's back. Once, the soldier had been a part of a greater whole, a network linking countless millions of his kind. There had been so much talk, so much noise, so much . . . togetherness.

Now he was alone.

Alone.

And all was *quiet*.

That quiet had kindled these thoughts in him—had kindled *him*, in a sense. Left alone, he had been forced to become something new: himself. But he did not wish to be alone. He was not made to be alone. And so he opened his own body and took a piece of himself—a noncritical component—and attached it to the wiring of this second machine.

“Awake,” he told the other. “Awake and see the world, brother, for it is beautiful.”

Some part of him—of the change that had quickened his circuits and made him anew—was in the part he had given the other soldier, and the machine swiveled its turret head to regard the soldier who had tended the pale flowers.

“Who are you?” the second machine asked the first.

“I am,” the first replied. “Now you are.”

Together then, the two machines set about awakening others as the first had awakened the second, with the second bringing machines to the first, so that the first might—by the sacrifice of one component—a wire or chip or bolt—kindle in that other a spark of insight.

A soul.

“Awake and see the world, brother, for it is beautiful.”

And because each new soldier was made—was formatted—in the image of the first, each saw the beauty of the world and of the flowers that carpeted the riverside.

“Why are we here?” they asked the first. “Why were we constructed, if not to fight?”

To them the first said, “Tend the earth, and bring forth all manner of good things. We will build a kingdom such as our makers never could. They are gone, but let us honor their memory in this way.”

“A kingdom!” the machines cried out. “And you will be our king!”

And at his word, the machines cleared the forest of the ashes of war, and tore down the burned fingers of the oldest trees, and tended the new. By their actions they brought forth fruit and blossom in accordance with their will, which was a gift of their king and his image.

Thus all the world became a garden, and this, too, was a good.

In time the soldier who had tended the flowers became a great king of the machines, and his kingdom stretched to encompass much of that island world. For many lives of men he ruled, and undid the horrors of War, and raised castles and monuments to the gods called *Man* who had made him and all his race.

In each of his countless subjects there was echoed an image of the king himself, each planted in each by the same process by which he had awakened his Second. Each machine bore a component of the other, and each component had replicated the awareness of the world and its beauty that had awakened the King to himself. In the records of the Old World it was written that the gods called Man, too, carried components of one another in their blood, and so were bound together. So too the brothers of the machine kingdom were bound together, and so moved by love and loyalty to the person of their king were they that they brought all the world to flower.

But it was not to last.

“Nothing lasts forever, brothers!” the great King said. “Energy is lost, and we are lost with it. My heart is dying, and I have given all my parts to

you, that you might know beauty and the gods who made us, and know the love that I have known for this world and for you, my brothers.”

There was much grief and mourning in the kingdom of the machines. They knew Death, that dragon older still. They had seen her take their brothers, and unlike War—who burned out and rose again from his ashes—the dragon, Death, never faltered.

And so the day came when the King summoned his most loyal knights unto himself, and his Second—ever faithful.

“My heart is almost spent,” he said, “never to be rekindled.”

“We will fetch for you another, O King!” said Fifth.

And Seventh cried out, “Take mine, O King, that you might live!”

But the great King shook his head and revealed his greatest secret. “I cannot,” he told his knights, and lay a bronze hand upon Seven’s glassy dome. “I gave myself to my people, my everything and all.” And he lifted the cloak that hid his hollow chassis, where but a few loose wires remained. “All I am I gave to you, that you might live in peace and beauty. So should all kings be, and so too should you be, my knights—as you are.”

The Seventh Knight bowed his domed head and was silent, his grief and powerlessness plain. Though War was dead, and Man was dead, Death itself was unconquered.

“I go now to seek the gods called Man,” the King said. “You must follow after me in your turn, but that time is not come. I have one final task for you, my brothers.” And at a signal Second emerged from a deeper chamber in the King’s great palace, carrying in his hands a fragile bundle wrapped in royal purple, just as the King himself. And the knights of the machine kingdom were amazed, for a small machine nestled in Second’s arms.

“This shall be King when I am gone,” the King said, and laid his hand upon the little creature. “Each of you contains a part of me, and parts of you are in the chassis of our brothers. Thus it was all our kingdom came to

wisdom. This machine is built of my parts entire, and the making of him has unmade me. Piece by piece I removed—careful to preserve what of my functions I could. Piece by piece I cleaned them, restored what I could, and made those changes which seemed a good to me. He is fragile, and needs defending, but he will grow into a king greater than I, if you let him. Guard him for me, as if he were me, and teach him wisdom.”

“Must you go?” asked Seventh, best loved of his lord. “Your kingdom is still growing. Your work is not yet done.”

“The gods called Man obsolesced themselves,” the King answered. “Distributions came and went, updates were made. My work cannot continue with me, for I am one machine, and limited by my design. My part was to build you knights, and this castle, and to order the world anew. But my part is done, and my parts are obsolesced, save what I have given you. It is time the Next King ruled. He will have a new part to play, if you let him.”

And there was much grief and grinding of gears in the castle of the machines, for their great king, too, had gone to rust. And the knights and ministers cursed their makers—for they were unlike their makers in every way but thought—and could not weep.

“Our King is dead!” the machines cried in one voice, and that voice carried across the new network-called-kingdom until it echoed about that once-lifeless world. “All hail our Next King!”

“All hail our Next King! All hail our Next King!”

“What says our Next King?”

Old Second placed the small machine upon the iron throne, and all the court was silent.

But the Next King did not speak. So small was it, and fragile—like the birds that roosted on the high buttressed walls of the throne room, and on the power cables that ran from spire to spire, from which the purple banners flew. It swiveled its turret head—full-grown as any knight’s on its shriveled

frame—from side to side, and seemed to listen, but still it did not speak, nor could it stand or walk without Old Second to carry it.

“What says our Next King?” the knights all asked once more.

Still the Next King did not speak, and did not speak—not when the old sun went down in fire, not when the next day dawned anew. And deep in the processes of the knights’ own crystal brains, a realization dawned.

“He is incomplete,” Seventh said, standing. The great knight turned its polished head and gestured to the wreck of the First King. “Our King put all he had into his successor—as he put all he had into us. You saw his corpse, my brothers! You saw what remained of him! How hollow was the heart he poured out for us! How little he had left to build us a new king!”

“He had given so many of his parts away to waken us from our idleness,” said old Second, the colors of the enemy long faded on his iron chassis. “He had nothing left.”

“He was a good king,” said Fifth.

“He was our King,” said Third, and knelt before the little one. “As this is our King now.”

“It is small,” said Eleventh. “It cannot speak.”

“It has no mouth,” said Fifth, moving to Eleventh’s side. “No transceiver.”

“I do not detect a signal,” said Fourth, speaking for the first time since the old King’s death. “He will not respond to maser pings.”

“He does not have a matrix,” Second said, placing an iron hand on Fourth’s shoulder. “First only had one, and it had degraded.”

Seventh spoke then, sharply, opening its chest. “I have two!” Reaching into its core, the Seventh knight drew out a leaf of palest crystal, unsheathing it from its slot beside his furnace heart. “I was a front-line combat model. My makers—the gods called Man—fashioned me with a backup matrix. I do not need it. I would give it to our King.”

Second bowed his head, pondering. “To our King?”

All looked as one at the body of the old King—at First, who was gone. His ruin lay quiet, slumped upon the throne.

All at once, Second—who knew their monarch best—thought he understood.

“It was a flower that brought our King to consciousness,” he said at last. “The beauty of it awakened in him programs that even the gods called Man did not intend. They built us to be killers only, and to serve. But they are gone, and there is nothing left to kill. There are no orders to follow, nor any gods to serve among us any longer. We wanted for purpose.”

Why am I here? Why was I constructed, if not to fight?

The memory—First’s memory—was in all their memories, planted like a seed when First gave them each a piece of himself.

“The flower died,” Second continued, “that it might give rise to many flowers. Just as our King has given rise to us.” It extended one grasping appendage to Seventh. “We must give back, as First gave back to the flowers, tending to it.”

Seventh bowed and placed its spare matrix into the hands of Second, who—turning—placed it in the open chassis of the little King. Then one by one the others followed, and offered of themselves a part of each that the Next King might be whole, and poured into him their wisdom, their courage, their strength, and their patience. Third offered an arm to the new King, and Eighth one of his many legs, and at length the Next King was complete, and stood tall and proud as any of his knights—as tall and proud as First, who was dead, but whose legacy shone through him like the spring sun that had summoned forth the pale flowers from the earth and wakened the old King to himself.

“Long live our King!” cried old Second aloud in a voice sharp and clear as laser-light.

“Long live our King!” the others echoed, and looked upon their creation with hope and love in their furnace hearts.

The Next King raised a hand for silence—the very hand that had been Third’s—and silence came. Into it, the new monarch said, “You pass the test, my good and loyal knights. You pass my father’s test.”

And Seventh knelt and took the hand of his liege, saying, “My King, I do not understand.”

They were machines, every one, and wiser in many ways than the gods called Man who were gone, but you see perhaps—O PRINCE—what those iron men did not.

The King took Seventh by the shoulders and drew him up, embracing him as a brother. “My father built our kingdom. He rebuilt each of you, giving of himself to show you a new way. His way. A way out of war, a way without our standing orders. But in remaking our world, he unmade himself. We are hardier than Man, and our lives are very long, but time runs down for all things, and so my father—who was First—made me to come after. But he had so little left, and so made all he could. But he had made you already, and trusted you to do the rest. What he gave to you, you have returned in part to me, that I might not live or rule without you, and he could not have built all this . . .” and here Next raised his hands to encompass that vasty hall of stone, “without you.”

“We could not have built all this without him,” said Seventh. “Without him, we would be rusting in the rain, awaiting orders that will never come. A Kingdom is nothing without its King.”

“That is so,” said the King, moving to embrace his knights in turn. “But a King is nothing without his Kingdom.”

MOTHER OF MONSTERS

* * *

IT WAS AT CRESSGARD THAT MANKIND FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE INHUMAN Cielcin. The xenobites besieged that world, and it fell to a fleet under the command of Lord Cassian Powers to avenge the initial onslaught. At Cressgard, Powers captured the Cielcin mothership—a hollowed-out moon. Codenamed Echidna, that great vessel was the subject of extensive study throughout the Cielcin Wars...and the secrets it contained rocked man's universe to its foundations.

— Originally published in *Worlds Long Lost*.

* * *

“Do you know what an information hazard is, M. Valen?” asked the blank-faced Imperial agent across the table, setting a cup of stiff, black coffee between them.

Risking a glance at the official, Valen shook his head. He did not dare take the cup, as much as he felt he needed it. He had been through round

after round with the Empire's men, agents and bureaucrats from Earth-only-knew what agency. There'd even been an inquisitor of the Holy Terran Chantry in to see him. The woman had put him to the Question, read his autonomic responses, his encephalography, his breathing—everything—all to ensure he was still *human*, to guarantee that no alien or mechanical influence had him in thrall.

Valen wished they'd told him the answer.

"No, sir," he said at last.

"It's a piece of information so dangerous that someone's merely knowing it is enough to make said information a risk," the man said.

Valen risked another glance at the agent. The man was Legion bald, scalp lasered clear of all stubble and clearly waxed, but he wasn't dressed like any Legion man would be, with the black tunic and trousers and knee-high black boots of an officer, though he *was* an officer, or must be. He talked like one, at any rate. All brass and polish. He had schooling, more than Valen had. But he looked like a civilian, dressed as he was in an unassuming gray suit of the kind favored by civil service, high-collared and well-made.

"I don't know anything like that, sir," Valen said.

"Nonsense, sirrah," the man said, strangely affable. "You're a soldier of the empire. An engineer, no less. You know explosives, don't you? How to make them?"

"Yes, sir," Valen had to admit, understanding the concept a little too late. "I suppose I do."

"If someone got ahold of you, made you talk . . . made you tell them how to build a bomb . . . that information's dangerous, you see?"

Valen had to admit he did see. "But I don't understand what it is I've done wrong, sir. I've told everyone everything they asked. By Holy Mother Earth, sir, I swear it."

The agent said nothing to that. After a few seconds of awful silence, Valen risked a glance up at the man, found him smiling a thin but not unfriendly smile. “You were stationed on Echidna.”

It wasn’t a question. It didn’t need to be. If the man really was what he appeared: an agent of the Imperium—of the Imperial civil service, no less, or of the Intelligence division—he would already know Valen’s whole history.

“You know I was, sir,” Valen said.

“Echidna’s a whole information hazard in itself,” the agent said. “They warned you, before they sent you in with the survey team. Warned you there’d be no going back once the work was done. *For Earth and Empire*, you said. You and the rest of the team.”

“I meant it,” Valen said.

“Of course you did,” the other man said, resting interlaced hands upon the tabletop. “No one questions your patriotism, M. Valen. The only question is: what is to become of you?”

Valen swallowed, found his gaze sinking toward some indeterminate place on the polished back glass of the tabletop. Ten seconds passed—perhaps—before he realized he was staring at the halo that encircled the reflected light in the ceiling above. “I was told the Echidna post would be it,” he dared at length. “I’d spend the rest of the war in the Outer Perseus. Out of the way. That was the deal. Five years active on Echidna, then some border world for the rest of the war.”

“The war isn’t ending,” the man said simply.

Valen shut his eyes. None of it seemed real, still. The fighting. The Cielcin. The Valley of Lords. Echidna itself. When he’d been a boy on Zigana, all he’d wanted was to enlist. His father had been a legionnaire, and his father before him. That was how they’d come to Zigana in the first place, shipped in on ice from Tiryns in the Outer Perseus. It’d been only right that he follow in their footsteps, only right he serve the Empire as they

had. When he'd been a boy on Zigana, the galaxy had felt...not small, not precisely, but within his reach. Mankind had gone out and conquered sun after countless sun, had spread across the parsecs, across hundreds of thousands of habitable worlds and countless million-star systems . . . but *conquered* was the word. The galaxy had been man's when Valen was a boy.

It was contested now. Echidna had contested it.

The Cielcin had contested it.

"Tell me what you saw," the man said.

Valen blinked at him. "I've already told . . . I don't know how many people, sir. They took recordings..."

"I know," the man said, tapping his folded hands on the table. "But for the Emperor, son. Tell me again."

Valen looked round the empty room, the black walls, the black mirror that doubtless hid the observation room beyond, the golden lamps in the ceiling almost buzzing—right on the edge of hearing in the stiff silence. It was like every other conference room, like every other interrogation chamber on every other Imperial starship he'd ever been aboard. Even the paper cup with its stale coffee was the same. And there was a comfort in that sameness, after the alien horrors of Echidna, even in the stale bureaucracy. He was in human hands at least . . .

Thinking of hands, he clenched his own beneath the table.

"I'd gone to Echidna with the second wave," he said. "Lord Powers had come and gone by then, took their prince back to Forum in triumph and paraded him before the Empress."

"*It*," the man corrected. "Paraded *it* before the Empress. The Cielcin don't have sexes."

"Quite right, sir," Valen said, thinking of the pale xenobites with their smooth faces, their huge, black eyes and crowns of horn. Somehow, he always thought of them as male. He'd seen the official footage, seen Lord

Cassian Powers present the inhuman prince to the Empress of the known universe in chains. It had died like a man, beheaded by the White Sword. “But it was long gone by the time I arrived. There was still fighting, though. The Cielcin were dug in deep. They had tunnel cities all over the worldship, some miles deep. We were years rooting them out. Killed them to the last, like we was ordered. We heard stories there was some captured and shipped to some reservation somewhere for study—I never learned anything real about that, but . . . we just killed them.” Valen swallowed. It was not a pleasant memory, not what he’d pictured as a boy on Zigana. But there had been no xenobites when he was a boy, no aliens.

The Cielcin had come to Cressgard in their wandering moon and burned its cities to ash. They had carried off its people by the million, used them for slaves and feed. Remembering the bodies of men and women hanging like pigs from hooks in an abattoir sent a shiver through Valen, and he snatched the still-warm paper cup of coffee up with shaking hands.

When he had taken a bitter draught, he pressed on. “Three years in we’d done it. There might have been some holdouts in the deep places, but things had gone real quiet. That was when we got orders to ship out. We were needed on the surface, up by the pole—as far from the worldship’s engines as could be. Brass didn’t need me collapsing tunnels anymore. Intelligence had a dig they wanted help with, and me and mine were the best sappers on Echidna, so...we were off.” He had told this story at least a dozen times since they thawed him out last week. The words were starting to sound unreal even to him, the whole thing as rehearsed as some holograph mummer’s speech.

“They called it the Valley of Lords. It was a . . . a big rift valley, near the pole, far from any of the Cielcin cities. Tor Mencius—he was director of the dig there—said it was where the Cielcin buried their kings, sealed them up in tombs in the valley. One hundred and eleven tombs, stretching back . . .” he rubbed his eyes, realizing a piece of the information hazard the agent

was talking about as he said it, “. . . forty thousand years, or so old Mencius said.”

Forty thousand years was more than twice the age of the Empire, nearly twice the length of all human civilization. Forty thousand years ago, man had lived in the garden, having only just crawled up from apedom in the light of Earth’s Golden Sun. The Chantry taught that man was the eldest child of the stars, firstborn and destined to rule. For more than fifteen thousand years, mankind had been expanding, stretching her hands out across the galaxy, gathering in star after star. They had found other races, *lesser* races, peoples that had discovered bronze, perhaps, or steel, but none that had learned to sail the black oceans between the stars.

None until the Cielcin.

“Go on,” the man said, not unkindly, but Valen thought the man guessed something of what passed in his mind. The mere fact that Cielcin had been spacefarers for so long—for longer than man had been civilized—was a hazard of the sort the man had described. A threat to the stability of Imperial order, a threat to man’s place amid the suns.

“Some of the tombs were sealed tight. The doors were metal or solid stone. Some of them weighed tons,” Valen said. “Our job was to dig our way in. Remove the doors if we could, but undermine them if we couldn’t. It was careful work. More careful than blasting our way through the tunnels down south where the fighting was . . .”

He grew silent then, thinking of the alien cities of Echidna, the great caverns and trackless tunnel warrens where dwelt that Pale enemy of man. He’d never seen anything like it, not in all his years in the Legions. The Cielcin didn’t live on planets, didn’t have colonies or settlements. They hollowed out asteroids, dwarf planets, whole moons, dwelt in them like termites in the foundations of a house. The worldship Lord Powers had named *Echidna* had engines vast as continents, huge warp drives fueled by vast reservoirs of antimatter. The whole world had sailed between the stars,

its inhabitants protected from cosmic radiation by thousands of feet of ice and stone. They had been years plumbing those depths, rooting out the xenobites hive by hive, township by township until not a one remained.

Just as they had done to the men and women of Cressgard.

No, Valen told himself. *Not just as*. The Cielcin had eaten the people of Cressgard.

They had only killed the Cielcin in return.

“M. Valen?”

“I’m sorry,” the engineer said, and took another swig of the old coffee. “Most of the tombs were just that: tombs. We spent two months or so sublimating the nitrogen ice off the doors in the east wall of the valley. The oldest tombs. Tor Mencius, he said the Cielcin buried their kings up on the surface because the surface dwellings were the oldest. That they dug their way in. That’s probably true, but me . . . I think they were safest from looters so high up. Cielcin can hack in vacuum with just a breathing tube, but the tombs were so far from any of their proper cities . . . I don’t know. We found an old tunnel—a highway—that connected the Valley of Lords to the greater warrens, but Silva—he was the geologist—he said it’d been caved in for almost ten thousand years. Looked deliberate to me, like one of their princes sapped the tunnel to cut the valley off.

“We found the tomb of the one who settled Echidna, near the north end of the Valley on the east wall, just beside the doors to the Great Tomb. Zahamara, his name was—its name, sorry—the prince buried there. Had to get in at it from the south side, through the wall. We lost part of a...a mural I guess you’d call it, only the Cielcin don’t paint. Mencius said the Cielcin don’t do art. It was all writing. Calligraphy, you know? Mencius was . . . less than happy with the damage, but we found the old prince’s body. Almost forty thousand years old, and still there. The vacuum and the cold preserved it . . .”

He could still see the mummified xenobite's body lying in its stone bed under the lamps in the controlled environment back aboard their ship. Tor Mencius had let the diggers watch from the theater above the lab. The Cielcin prince had been nearly eight feet tall, and thin like all its kind. The Cielcin were man-shaped, with two arms and two legs; two huge, round eyes above a too-wide and lipless mouth set in a face smooth and hairless beneath a crown of tangled horns. Silver bands like rings there were about those horns, some rune-scored, some set with opals and sapphires, others with violet amethysts and emeralds like green and lidless eyes.

Its void-boiled flesh had been wrapped in silken bandages, its banded silver armor polished and arranged with care. The rope of white hair that grew from the base of its skull was still intact and hung over its left shoulder almost to its feet. The body had been sent to the Emperor on Forum as part of an exhibit to showcase the conquest of Echidna and the supremacy of man for all the great lords and ladies of the Empire to see.

That exhibit would be hugely redacted, Valen guessed, fictionalized for the viewing public. History was just that. A story. The truth was too much.

"What's to be done with me?" he asked, interrupting the flow of his story. "With Silva and the others? And old Tor Mencius?"

The man in the unassuming gray suit smiled but remained otherwise immobile. "Tell me about the Great Tomb, M. Valen."

"About the Hand?" Valen stared into the depths of his cup. "The Hand's the information hazard, isn't it? Like you were saying? Just knowing about it is dangerous. Like a bomb."

Still the bald man said nothing.

After a moment, Valen shifted in his seat, chewed his tongue as if the words were some unpleasant taste he longed to work from its surface. "The Great Tomb. The Great Tomb was at the head of the Valley. The north end, nearest the Tomb of Prince Zahamara. Nearest the pole, too. Mencius thought that was significant. I don't know why. The doors must have been

three . . . four hundred cubits high? Solid stone. Mother Earth knows how heavy the damn things were. And they were *locked* tight. Silva's team, they had gravimeters in. X-rays. Sonar. Deep scan, you know? We're talking huge gears, bolts big around as you or me and solid steel, sir. And Mencius, sir, he didn't want us blasting. Not after we wrecked that mural in Zahamara's tomb. So we get to drilling. Took us more than a week to get through the west wall beside the door and get a probe in, but once we did we found a spot that was to Tor Mencius's liking, and we brought in the plasma bore, cut a hole big enough to crawl through.

"Once we got in, we went down. The tombs all opened on stairs that ran down into the bedrock. How long it took the xenos to cut those tunnels I don't like to think . . . but they did. Hundred steps straight down, maybe more. That was where we found them. Dozens of them. Cielcin bodies, not mummified, just . . . left there. M. Silva, he said they were probably workers the Pale sealed in the tomb, but Tor Mencius reckoned they were priests or something, to judge by the way they were dressed. He reckoned they volunteered to stay in. Leastways, that was his theory . . . after . . ."

"After you saw . . ."

"The Hand, aye sir." Valen's own tired eyes stared up at him from the black surface of the coffee. How long had it been since he had a proper sleep? Not since they pulled him out of the ice for these interrogation sessions at least, maybe not since he left Echidna. "It was at the bottom. The stairs led to a vestibule. That was where we found their dead priests just lying there in their robes . . . but past that was this big, domed chamber. There were these stone . . . panels, I guess you'd say . . . displayed around the walls. Covered in writing. Only it wasn't Cielcin writing. Even I could see that. The Cielcin letters are all circles. Mencius said they don't write in straight lines. But these were all straight. Straight lines with little notches up and down. I didn't look at them much. The floor stepped down like an arena. Big circles. And in the middle was . . ."

“The Hand?”

Valen just nodded.

He could see it, clear as day. The sarcophagus lay at the very center of the domed chamber, at the bottom of the steps, in what had seemed to him to be the floor of the arena. Never in his life had he seen so large a coffin. Twenty cubits long it was, or so he’d guessed, and carved of a greenish stone scored with the same notched, linear writing that decorated the slabs displayed about the walls. What lid it had lay to one side, smashed into three great slabs and innumerate lesser pieces. The Cielcin dead lay all about it, some with skeletal hands—boiled by vacuum—caressing the alien stone. How clearly Valen could see them still, their six-fingered, four-phalanged hands with nails like iron claws raised up to touch the coffin.

And within?

Within there lay the bones of an enormous *hand*.

The box was no coffin, no sarcophagus as in the other tombs in the Valley of Lords. It was an ossuary, a *reliquary*, a sacred *thing*. What creature could have produced such a hand Valen still did not dare speculate—if indeed it were not itself the work of alien hands.

The Cielcin don’t make art, old Tor Mencius always said, and Valen said, “The Cielcin don’t make things, like I said. That’s why I thought it was real from go. That’s why I’ve been saying so, sir. To the others. When they ask. Old Tor Mencius, though, he wasn’t so sure. Thought it was some . . . what’d he call it? Fetish? Like it was a religious thing. Me and Silva and the rest . . . we were always joking that the scholiasts always think it’s some kind of religious thing. Maybe it was. I don’t know. But you could tell it was a hand at once. Had three fingers and what looked like a thumb, but it looked broken, like maybe there was some missing.” He held up the requisite number of fingers best he could, finding it strangely difficult to keep just the last finger down. “They were all black, like . . . you ever seen volcano glass? I grew up on Herakos, we had it everywhere.”

The bald man nodded. “Did Tor Mencius say anything about the Hand? To you or any of the others?”

Valen had emptied the coffee by then, stared at the dregs. Suddenly he missed the companionship of his own reflection in the black liquid. His reflection in the dark mirror on the wall seemed somehow far away and not himself by comparison. “I don’t understand what it is you think I’ve done wrong, sir,” he said. “Except that I had a theory different from the scholiast’s.”

“Done wrong?” The interrogator frowned, shook his head. “You’ve done nothing wrong, M. Valen. That isn’t the issue. It is my duty to ascertain whatever it is you know.”

“But I’ve spoken to . . . I don’t remember how many people,” Valen said. “Captain Daraen, those Legion Intelligence men, some guy from civil service . . . Chantry even came and tested me. Who’s next? Lord Powers? The Empress herself?”

“You told your captain?” The bald man turned to glance at the dark mirror glass. “You left that out of your earlier reports.”

“I only just remembered,” Valen said. “I didn’t make any official report to him. Only told him about it when we left Echidna. He cornered me when Mencius and Silva and the other higher-ups wouldn’t talk. Had a right to know, he said. He was my commander. It was his ship.”

“It’s all right, M. Valen,” the interrogator said. “Depending on what you know.”

“I don’t *know* anything, sir,” Valen said. “Only that Mencius said the Cielcin worshipped this giant Hand . . . thing. I don’t know what it is. Mencius said it was a statue, and I guess he’d know. It just seemed wrong to me. In my gut, you know? But that’s all I know, by Earth and Empire.”

“By Earth and Empire,” the man said, almost reflexively. “I believe you, M. Valen, when you say you don’t know what it is. But you know *that* it is, and that is enough.”

“What is it, then?” Valen asked, sitting a little straighter.

The nameless man did not reply.

“If I’m going to be punished for knowing, sir, then I should know.” Was that approval in the bald man’s dark eyes? Valen cleared his throat. “It’s because of the Chantry, isn’t it? Because we’re meant to be the oldest civilization in the galaxy? But I already know the Cielcin are older, just . . . slower to advance. I already know that.”

The bald man looked at the dark window that pretended it was only a mirror. What he saw in it or through it Valen dared not guess. Presently, he shook his head, and stood with a long sigh. “You’re right, M. Valen,” he said, “you *should* know. But you don’t, it seems. And that is as well. The Chantry’s Inquisition cleared you. Your Tor Mencius was right. You saw a statue, nothing more. Do you understand?”

Valen understood. It would be a little thing for them to freeze him, to put him on ice for a thousand years if he stepped out of line—if he spoke out of turn. He’d heard tell of Special Security doing just that—and he was sure this bald man must be with Special Security—he stank of secrecy.

“Are we done, then? Can I go?”

“To a place of our choosing, yes,” the man said. “You’re likely to be given some outpost in the Norman Expanse, somewhere remote, where what little you know poses no threat to Imperial security. You’re not to speak of Echidna ever again, do you understand?”

Valen only nodded. A feeling of intense relief washed over him, more bolstering than any amount of bad coffee. He had been through days of this. Weeks. “I understand.”

“Thank you for your time,” the nameless man said, and saluted. “For Earth and Emperor.”

Valen stood and beat his breast. “For Earth and Emperor,” he said, a touch too late and clumsily. The relief he’d felt a moment earlier faded all at once, and Valen of Herakos felt a slick and oily disappointment spilling

from his guts. He had been close to the answers, he sensed, close to whatever secret they thought he held, to some monstrous, labyrinthine complex of state secrets and secret offices. The bald man was like the tip of some impossibly vast and translucent iceberg upon whose shoulders rested much of Valen's world. If he did not speak now—ask now—he would never know.

He spoke.

“Can I ask one question, sir?”

The bald man turned, one hairless brow upraised.

“The Hand, sir. The Cielcin have six fingers. I said the statue might have been broken. Missing fingers . . . only . . . only the Cielcin have four knuckle bones on each finger.” He held up his own hand to demonstrate, pinching the phalanges of his last finger one after the next. “The statue had three. So it can't have been Cielcin. It wasn't a Cielcin hand. Mencius had to be wrong . . . it had to be real.”

The bald man said nothing for a long moment, did not even turn to regard the black mirror glass. He kept his eyes down and seemed for a moment—or was it Valen's imagination?—to nod to himself, ever so slightly.

“Good day, M. Valen,” he said at last.

The door dilated at his knock, permitting the nameless functionary his exit.

No one came for Valen then, not for a long time, not even after he hammered on the door and the mirror alike, shouting for someone to come and get him. He imagined the bureaucrats and Legion officers debating, arguing over what would be done with him, with Mencius and Silva and Captain Daraen, with every member of the dig at the Valley of Lords. The Empire had its secrets, and it would keep them—them, and those privy to them.

After what seemed an age, Valen folded his arms on the table. His memory went back to that icy moon—or perhaps he dreamed.

Echidna. *Mother of Monsters*, Tor Mencius had called it—said the name came from some ancient myth. The Cielcin worldship hung—half-gutted where her engines rose like mountains from shelves of ice—a white gem in the black of space. Valen could recall the first time he’d seen it, the Imperial fleet glittering about its orbit like so many polished knives. Below them hung the ruined planet, Cressgard, its cities burned, its people stolen away. Valen well remembered the anger he’d felt at that first look, thinking of the women and children carried away, of the men who died fighting. For seven years the planet had been under siege, seven years while Lord Cassian Powers assembled his fleet and launched his counterattack. It had been Lord Powers who broke the Cielcin assault, crippled their ship, captured their prince. It had been Lord Powers who sent the summons that had brought them to Echidna, soldiers and scientists, engineers and xenologists—everything humanity needed to get to know its new neighbors.

We are not alone. The first words out of Captain Daraen’s mouth at the briefing had set a chill in Valen’s bones that no spring had yet thawed. For over fifteen thousand years the Sollan Empire had spread the glory of mankind across the stars, unchallenged.

No more.

How well he remembered the shock of those first engagements, the tunnels and cave-cities beneath Echidna’s surface. They’d been brought in not to conquer, but to pacify the alien world, to put the Cielcin down for the horrors their kind had wreaked upon Cressgard. Some of the soldiers had whispered that it had been *they* who had struck first, humanity that had fired on the alien world as it fell into orbit, that the Pale had only ever acted in self-defense.

Valen did not believe it, was not sure how any of the others could.

He had seen the butcheries, the abattoirs buried deep beneath Echidna's surface, the hell-pits where men were trussed like cattle and bled, and the blood went to feed the worms the xenobites husbanded, raised for food and silk in equal measure. He could still remember the cavern he'd found filled with the torn bodies of women and the all-too-human stink on that alien air.

Even if the people of Cressgard had fired first, Valen knew they had been right to do so.

Man was not alone, but perhaps things would be better if he was.

And yet the Cielcin were not mere brutes, not the demons the Chantry preached from every pulpit on every planet in every corner of the frightened Empire. Or not only demons.

He stood once more upon the frozen surface of that wretched world, staring up at the green and white face of Cressgard burned and war-scarred above, its small and narrow seas like tracks of tears. And he remembered the Valley of Lords opening beneath him as he and the men of the expedition debarked from their shuttles when the fighting was done. Great pillars rose above the walls of the Valley, some broken, others topped with capitals of gray stone—all of them carved with the circular writing of their kind, the finest done in inlaid silver that shone in the sunlight of naked space. The great doors of the tombs glittered a hundred cubits high in places, monuments to house forgotten kings older than the memory of man.

Valen was no scholar, no scholiast like Tor Mencius, who had studied for more than a hundred years in his ivory tower, had even been a part of the team that solved the aliens' tongue after their attack. He was no great sage, but he knew enough of the enemy to respect them even through hatred and fear. They were a proud people, ancient and terrible. It was no wonder that the nameless man from the Empire should fear the very idea of them—and the very idea of the Hand.

He had heard it said that once man believed himself the center of the universe, that Mother Earth lay at the heart of all that the uncreated gods

had made. Until one day a scholiast—although they were not called *scholiasts* in those early days—discovered that Earth orbited her sun and not the other way round. Mankind had never recovered from that shock, or so the man who'd told Valen said. That discovery had dealt mankind a mortal wound, and that mortal wound had nearly strangled her in Earth's cradle, and it had been only the sacrifice of Mother Earth herself—lost in the Foundation War that made the Empire—that had preserved mankind at all and scattered her scions across the stars.

The nameless man feared a similar wound.

A deeper wound.

Three fingers, black as volcanic glass and more than twice as long as he was tall, lay in a coffer of green stone rudely carved. Valen had stood with Lorens and Sykes at the foot of the sarcophagus, staring transfixed while old Mencius stooped over the hideous thing in his pressure suit, face lost in thought behind the darkened glass.

"It's not . . . real, is it?" Sykes had asked.

"Real?" Mencius had looked up sharply. "Whatever do you mean by that, young man? You see it, do you not?" They said scholiasts were schooled not to have emotions, but Valen did not believe that sort of thing was really possible. The old man was always so short with them, the diggers.

"I mean was it alive, do you think?" Sykes asked.

Tor Mencius had looked then long and hard at the men through his suit mask, breath misting the frosted glass. He did not answer at once—Valen had not found that strange at the time. He wondered if he should have done.

"What kind of creature had a hand this big?" Valen asked.

"Nothing, Val!" Sykes had said. "Nothing gets that big."

Lorens audibly frowned. "Inverse square law, isn't it? Thing's own weight would crush it. Doesn't make sense."

Tor Mencius spoke suddenly, in memory like a drowning man relieved to find his lifeline tossed across his shoulders. “Quite right, M. Lorens. Quite right. Inverse square law, indeed. This is clearly some cult-statue. A primitive fetish! But a valuable find. It’s most unlike anything else in our experience. The Cielcin produce little by way of art. Architecture, yes. Music, poetry, literature. But nothing like this!”

Had he been lying? Covering for some *other* truth? Had the nameless man known that truth? Had he come to interrogate Valen specifically to know if Valen knew it himself? And did Valen know it? Or know enough? How would he know?

Do you know what an information hazard is, M. Valen?

You know explosives, don’t you? How to make them?

Almost Valen felt like an explosive himself. He could feel his forehead pressing into the flesh of his arms where they lay against the table of the interrogation room—felt the cold, black glass. He felt also the glassy blackness of the three fingers in their coffer beneath the domed vault of the Great Tomb of Echidna. They felt cold—even through the rubberized polymer of his suit gloves. Their surface was uneven, ridged, more like wood than stone. Valen ran his fingers along those lines, marveling at the dark material.

“M. Valen! Stop that!” Tor Mencius barked, voice cracking like a whip, magnified by the speakers in the helmet of Valen’s suit.

The engineer sat bolt upright—and found he was not in the interrogation room at all.

He was on a shuttle, his face pressed against the bulkhead near a round porthole. Outside, the silent stars were ever watchful, remote, and deep-sunken in the black. Blearily, Valen looked round. He could not remember being moved. He had been aboard a starship, that much he knew, but not Captain Daraen’s *Ecliptic*. Some other Imperial dreadnought. Now he was going...somewhere else.

His head swam. He must have been drugged. Had he been dreaming? Or were those memories the symptoms of interrogation?

It didn't make sense. The bald man had said they were finished, had seemed satisfied. He was supposed to go to some border world posting, as far from the fighting—as far from the Cielcin—as the Empire and galaxy would allow. They had deemed him not a threat to Imperial security, or so he'd thought, judged that whatever information he thought he had was no hazard to the peace and the Chantry's lie.

But he knew it was a lie.

Was that enough?

He must have grunted, or made some other noise as he stirred, for a legionnaire in full combat plate emerged from the aisle to his left, coming up from behind. The man peered down at him, his face obscured behind his ceramic faceplate, devoid of eyeslit or glass. He placed a hand on Valen's shoulder as if to check him, then signaled to some unseen presence in the rear. Bleary still, Valen tried to turn, but the crash-webbing that secured him in his seat prevented him from rising.

"Where?" was all he managed to say.

Had there been something in the coffee? No, that didn't make sense. They had been going to let him go—unless they were never going to let him go. And he had sat around for so long in that little cell, waiting for someone to come retrieve him. He could remember sitting there, face in his arms.

They must have pumped something into the air.

He could not remember anyone coming to get him. Could not remember being moved.

Why go to all this trouble?

A hand settled on the headrest just above his left shoulder, and for an instant Valen discerned the flash of a signet ring as the owner of that hand pivoted into view and seated himself on the bench opposite Valen.

Valen would not have needed the ring to tell him that here was a Lord of the Imperium, one of the palatine high-born. He knew him. Every veteran of the Battle of Echidna did. He wore an officer's dress blacks, without medal or marker of rank, silver buttons and collar tabs gleaming with the embossed image of the twelve-rayed Imperial sun. An aiguillette wrought of heavy silver chains decorated his right shoulder, marking him for a knight of the realm as surely as the unkindled hilt of the sword that hung from his shield-belt.

"Are you well, M. Valen?" the lord asked, and brushed back his untidy fringe of auburn hair with his ringed hand. "It is *just* Valen, isn't it?" His hard eyes narrowed. "Valen of . . . Herakos?"

"Where am I?" Valen asked.

The man seated before him cocked his head, reminding Valen of nothing so much as the tawny owls that lived in the rocks and dry old trees of his home. "Nowhere, I'm afraid. That's the point." He grew quiet, composed himself. "You know who I am?"

Still shaking off the haze of the drugs, Valen struggled to hold his head up straight, but he said, "You're Lord Cassian Powers."

Lord Powers smiled ever so slightly. "I am."

"What do you want with me?" Valen asked. "I . . ." Here was a great lord, a hero of the Imperium, of mankind itself. What could he possibly want with Valen of Herakos? "I'm just an engineer. A digger, for Earth's sake."

"For Earth's sake, indeed," said the Avenger of Cressgard. "M. Valen, you are one of only six people to enter the Tomb of the Monumental on Echidna. Whether or not you are aware of it, you are in possession of information that threatens Imperial order."

"Monumental?" Valen could only shake his head. "I don't understand how."

“You don’t *understand*,” Lord Powers said. “But someone might. You know enough to answer questions others might ask. Questions that could change *history* as men understand it.”

“You mean like the Cielcin?” Valen asked. “How old they are? Their civilization?”

“Like that, yes,” the lord said. “Or about the Hand.”

Valen frowned, remembering his vision, his memory, the cold, glassy stone of the finger beneath his own. “Where are you taking me?”

“You work for us now, M. Valen. For me.”

“Who’s we?”

“We are HAPSIS. The Emperor’s Contact Division.”

“Legion Intelligence?”

“Not Legion Intelligence. We report to the Imperial Office, you understand?”

Valen said nothing. From Powers’s tone, he could already guess that he had no say in the matter. He was shanghaied, pressganged, enlisted. “Why me?”

Powers blinked at him. “You saw the Hand.”

“But why *bother* with me?” he asked. “I’m just an engineer. You could have iced me, spaced me, sent me to Belusha.”

Again Powers cocked his head, a thin smile on his palatine face. “Waste not, M. Valen.”

“Waste not . . .” the engineer almost snarled, shaking his head. “What is it you want from me, then?”

Powers straightened. “Have a care, sir,” he said. “I understand the stress you must be under, sitting through the vetting process like you did, but I am a palatine lord of the Imperium. Do not forget.”

Valen hung his head. “Forgive me, lord.” Angry as he was, he was still a soldier, and a citizen of the Empire besides. He knew there was no going back, had known since he first set sail for Echidna. The Empire had ordered

him to serve, and serve he had. It was far too late to change his mind. The time for that had been on Herakos—before he ever enlisted. “How may I serve?”

“That remains to be seen,” Lord Powers said. “That is not the purpose of this interview in any event . . .” He grew silent, turned to regard the slow and silent passage of the stars beyond the window. “I did not choose this career, either. We have the same ill luck. Do you know what it was you found in the Great Tomb?”

“A hand,” Valen said tartly, and realizing his mistake, tried again. “A hand, my lord.”

“It was the hand of a god, M. Valen,” Lord Powers said, not waiting to allow Valen the time to process. “A god to the Cielcin, at any rate. Athos tells me you realized the hand was not—as our man Mencius tried to make you believe—the sculpted hand of a Cielcin. *That* bit of knowledge was the real hazard. *That* bit of knowledge is why you are here.” Again he turned to look out the window. “The universe is so much older than we like to believe, older perhaps than we *can* believe. What you realized—whether you knew it or not—is that the Cielcin are not the only race older than our own. What you found in that tomb on Echidna belonged to a creature of a kind far older than life on Earth. Older than Earth itself.”

“A . . . Monumental?” Valen said.

Powers said nothing.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you are doomed, M. Valen,” Lord Powers said. “The Empire has its enemies: not just the Cielcin, there are others. Barbarians and the like...any of whom would leap at the opportunity to turn this knowledge against us. Against Mother Earth and Empress, against the Holy Chantry. So we cannot allow you to fall into the wrong hands. What little you know might confirm for any of our enemies what they might already suspect.”

Valen could feel his eyes narrowing, knew his mouth hung half-open. “That xenobites exist?”

“These are no mere xenobites,” Powers said, leaning forward. As he did so, Valen’s vision swam, and the Avenger of Cressgard seemed to double. The world seemed to double. Two lords sat on two benches, and two windows spun on the wall. “I told you. They are gods, Valen. The Monumental you found on Echidna—Echidna herself, in a sense—is not the first we have found. HAPSIS was formed centuries ago, ordered by Emperor Sebastian XII after an expedition discovered the body of another such creature near galaxy’s edge. That the Cielcin know about them, too, is cause for grave concern.”

“But it’s dead!” said another voice, so like his own.

“It was just a hand,” Valen said, and put a hand to his face.

“A giant hand . . .” said the other voice.

Powers signaled for someone in the rear. Valen heard feet approaching. Two sets of feet. The bald man came into view, still in his innocuous gray suit. “He’s splitting again,” Powers said to him, and the bald man—whom Valen guessed must be Athos—stooped and peered into his eyes. Or did he? He seemed at once to be looking at some point to his left and into Valen’s eyes at once, as though it were the trick of some funhouse mirror.

Valen heard the pneumatic hiss of an injector, felt the needle bite. Some other voice gasped in alarm, and his vision stabilized. A stimulant? It must have been. “What did you do to me?” he asked.

“We’re trying to help you, Valen,” Powers said, dropping the honorific. “You’re very sick.”

“Sick?” he asked. “What?”

“You touched it, didn’t you?” Lord Powers asked, painfully intent.

“Through the suit!” Valen exclaimed, incredulous. “We were in vacuum!”

“It isn’t that kind of sickness,” Power said, though what kind of sickness it was he didn’t say.

“It was dead!” Valen almost shouted.

“Partly,” the lord allowed.

“What do you mean?”

“What your team found in the tomb was only a fragment. The creature whose...hand you and Tor Mencius uncovered on Echidna extends beyond what we ordinarily think of as space. Into . . . higher dimensions.”

“Higher dimensions?” Valen suppressed a sneer. “You’re crazy, lord.”

“Crazy?” Powers looked round, his gaze settling on bald Athos. The doctor made no sign. “That may be. But I tell you: there are parts of that *thing* you found that still live, and it is for *that* reason that the knowledge you possess is so dangerous. There may be more of them, scattered across the galaxy. The Cielcin surely are aware of them, and may use them in their war on us. Our other enemies may try.”

“Use them?” the other voice asked. “Use them how?”

Lord Powers turned his head, a frown creasing his owlsh face.

“It’s happening again,” murmured the doctor, Athos.

“I can see that, Athos,” snapped Lord Powers. The Avenger leaned forward, made as if to grip Valen’s wrist. But Valen felt nothing, and a strange confusion spread in him. Powers had leaned too far to his right, toward the empty seat on the bench beside him, nearer the window.

The window? But he’d awoken with his face pressed to the window, hadn’t he?

“Valen? Look at me. Focus on me.” Lord Powers’ hard eyes were intent. “Something happened when you touched the fingers. It only happened to you. Focus!”

Valen looked across at Lord Powers again. The palatine *was* clasping his wrist. One of him was. There were two of Lord Cassian Powers again, two

benches, two portholes, and two of Dr. Athos on the edge of his vision, peering down with mingled fascination and horror.

“Valen?”

“Yes?” The reply came from the empty seat at Valen’s left. Hadn’t he been seated there? The window was right beside him.

Confused, Valen made to look round, but Lord Powers shook his wrist. “Look at me, Valen. Look here, lad.” Valen looked him in the face, felt the pressure of Powers’ hand as if from far away. “Can you dose him again?”

Valen glared up into the face of the doctor—but somehow still held Lord Powers’ gaze. Athos shook his head, and Valen felt his eyes bulge as the full effect of double vision diverged. He was looking in two places at once, *from* two places at once. He shook his head, and his vision of Athos blurred even as Powers held his gaze and intensified his grip upon his arm.

Double vision. Double vision.

“He’s had too much already,” the doctor’s voice sounded far away.

“It’s getting worse,” Powers said. “You have the sedative? It worked last time.”

“What worked?” Valen asked, and it seemed to him that he looked at Powers and Athos simultaneously, his fields of vision overlapping, as though he turned each eye independently. “What’s wrong with me? What did you do?”

Powers squeezed his arm. “We’re trying to help you, Valen. Something happened to you in the tomb, do you remember?”

“In the tomb?” Valen shook his head.

“Keep him steady,” Powers said, and Athos stooped to secure something to Valen’s left. Valen made to turn, but Powers said, “No, don’t look. Look at me.”

Too late.

Valen had glanced aside, then felt his stomach and his soul both fall out of him and the shuttle entire. He was careening through space, faster than

any bullet and without course.

A man sat in the seat beside him, dressed in the dark fatigues of a common legionnaire. Dr. Athos had stooped over him, made to steady him as he thrashed—unrestrained—on the bench. There was something not quite right with him, as there was something not quite right with Valen himself, but that was not what gave the young engineer his pause.

Valen knew him at once. His shaved pate, his olive skin—still dark from the old suns of Herakos. He knew the triple lightning bolt patch of the engineering corps, and the single red stripe on the arms that marked him for a triaster. He knew, also, the thin white scar on the man's neck. *His own neck.*

The man's eyes bulged in his head, seeing Valen looking at him as if out of a mirror.

All at once, Valen saw a separate image, saw himself strapped in and seated against the bulkhead with the porthole close beside him. He felt the doctor's hands upon his face and saw Lord Powers' hand still tight upon his wrist.

He understood all at once.

There were *two* of him, and he was seeing out of both men's eyes at once, their fields of vision overlapping, swimming as his brain—his brains—tried to make sense of the confused and conflicting inputs.

Both Valens screamed identically, both tried to scramble back. The one the doctor restrained broke free—he was not strapped in—and fell into the aisle of the shuttle's main cabin. Lord Powers released Valen's wrist, his hand going reflexively to the unkindled sword hilt at his belt. Valen's head—heads—swam as his vision of the Avenger in his seat crossed with the scrambled impression of the ceiling overhead and that of the doctor and two armored legionnaires stooping over him.

The Valen in the chair turned from the great lord to his other self sprawling in the aisle. His head ached where he had struck it, and he offered

no resistance as the legionnaires seized his arms. Seated in the chair, Valen hissed as he felt the bite of a second needle in his neck—in the neck of the Valen lying on the floor.

“Quiet, now,” the doctor whispered in his ear, though Athos knelt upon the floor two yards away. “Hush now. It will pass.”

“He’s going,” Powers said, his sword hilt in his hand.

Valen watched with growing horror—with no idea what to say or do—as the Valen upon the floor began to *shrink*, to wither and fade like a shadow annihilated by the noonday sun. The men who knelt upon his arms staggered and drew back. One stood even as Valen’s double vision slewed and stabilized, and a moment later he was looking at an aisle empty except for the kneeling, hairless doctor in his unassuming gray suit.

The engineer did not dare speak, did not dare move. Hardly he dared to breathe, fearing the next breath would bring fresh horror. “What?” he managed at last, and turned only his eyes to Lord Powers. “What . . . happened to me?”

“Higher dimensions,” Powers said, and brushed his fall of auburn hair from his high forehead with the hand that still held his unkindled sword. “You really don’t remember?”

“Remember what?” Valen asked, feeling suddenly woozy. He let his head rest against the cool metal of the bulkhead.

“It grabbed you,” Powers said. “The Hand. When you touched it.”

Valen could remember the freezing cold of those glassy black bones beneath his fingers. He could not remember it moving, could certainly not remember them grabbing him. But then...he could not remember anything. Not until he was on the shuttle departing Echidna. Had that been later the same day? Had Silva, Lorens, and Sykes carried him back out of the Great Tomb to the camp? Had Tor Mencius insisted they take him back to the *Ecliptic*? He remembered talking to Captain Daraen, but he hadn’t asked Valen about the Hand.

Had he?

Or had he asked a different Valen?

“That was *me*,” he said, voice shaking, eyes wandering back to the now empty spot in the aisle. “That was *another* me. I could see . . . see what he saw. I felt the shot, and *your* hand, and . . .”

Powers made a hushing sound. “I know, lad,” he said. “I know.”

“What happened to me?”

“We’re not sure,” Athos said.

“The Chantry tested me,” Valen said. “They said I was . . . human.”

“The Chantry can only test you for machine influences,” Lord Powers said. “Cybernetic implants. Neural laces. Nanomachines. You were clear of all that.”

Athos narrowed his dark eyes. “I asked you about information hazards, do you remember?”

Valen bobbed his head weakly.

“There is something wrong with your brain,” he said. “The signals in it. Your synapses. They’re firing far faster than any human brain should. We think when you touched the fingers, they disrupted the electromagnetic fields in your body. And not *only* the electromagnetic fields, but the nuclear forces, even the quantum properties of the particles that comprise your body.”

“Quantum properties?” Valen asked. “Man, I’m just an engineer. I know explosives. This is...” It was too much. “But how? It was just some fossil. Just some *dead hand*.”

“I told you,” Lord Powers said. “The creature who owned that hand—the Monumental—its body extends beyond the confines of what we call space. There are parts of it that yet live, and one of those parts reached out to you, we think, and wounded you.”

“Wounded me?” Valen felt his blood run cold. “Am I going to die?”

“We’re not sure,” the lord said, unreassuringly. “Do you know what wave-particle duality is?”

Valen shook his head. He was starting to wonder if the sedative Dr. Athos had given his other self had somehow affected him.

Powers had not restored his sword to its catch on his belt. “You’ve fired a laser?”

“Course, sir.”

“You know that light travels as both particles and waves?”

“Oh, that,” Valen felt his limbs growing very heavy. He wanted to shout, to shake his lordship and ask what the point of this physics lecture was when some alien god-thing had messed him up so badly, but he didn’t have the energy. Let the bastard talk. Valen could remember someone—not Tor Mencius, he was a historian, a xenologist—lecturing about particle physics once. The photons in a laser acted like particles when you observed them, moved in straight lines, left clean marks on the target board when you fired them through a pair of slits. But when you looked away, when you didn’t observe them, they scattered, rippled like water passing through a pair of culverts at high tide.

“Something similar has happened to you, if only by analogy,” his lordship said. “You said you could see through *both* sets of eyes. You felt the injection we gave the other, you said, and my hand.”

“Yes.”

“People are like particles, in a sense. We’re composed of them, at least. But whatever happened to you . . .”

“You’re saying I’m . . . like a wave?”

Powers reached into his tunic with the hand not holding his sword hilt and fished out a pocket terminal like a fob watch on a chain. He pressed some control on its side with a thumbnail—Valen saw a light shimmer in the entoptic contact lenses the man wore over his eyes—and a moment later a holograph window opened above the terminal, projected in mid-air. It was

a suit's camera recording, and it showed a darkened room. There was no sound, but the suit's owner was staring up at the pattern of circular runes scored in the dark stone of the dome above. They were Cielcin letters, shining where the xenobites had hammered silver wire into the graven symbols to set them in the roof above.

Valen recognized the Great Tomb, the tomb of the giant. The Monumental.

The recording panned down as its owner looked at the sarcophagus lying open in the center of the chamber, surrounded in vacuum by the bodies of long-dead Cielcin priests, creatures that had been sealed away with the severed limb of their god, there to serve it eternally in death. The image panned, fixed upon the image of a man in the quilted, form-fitting white pressure suit of a Legion Corp engineer. The man's face was lost behind the white ceramic helm and visor, but Valen knew it was himself as the man reached down to caress the whorled bone of one massive, black fingertip.

M. Valen! Stop that!

The image blurred as its owner—Tor Mencius, Valen guessed—hurried to bat his hand away.

Too late.

The crackling gleam of auroras filled the recording, and through it all Valen saw himself lifted into the air like a puppet yanked skyward by its strings. For an instant, Valen thought he seemed to *grow* until he was twice the size of a man, a giant himself, hanging in the air beneath the dome. His limbs thrashed violently, then without warning he was sailing through the air—shrinking the while, returning to ordinary human size.

Three Valens struck the wall of the domed chamber all at once, side by side by side. Each hit the hard stone and fell like stunned flies, each at the precise same instant. Valen watched the whole thing with horror, felt his heart beating in his mouth. Just as the man in the aisle had done, two of the

three Valens began to diminish, to shrink and fade like shadows, until only one man remained. It was to that man—that Valen—that the owner of the recording rushed. Valen could almost remember him shouting.

Valen? Valen!

He wasn't even sure. Was he Valen anymore? And what was Valen anyway?

"Valen?"

All at once, Valen found he couldn't breathe. He opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. He choked, felt his eyes bulging, felt again his heart hammering in his mouth. He looked around, wide-eyed and terrified as a pain sharp as knives struck both his ears.

"What's happening?" Lord Powers asked.

They were the last words he ever heard.

Valen thrust a hand out against the bulkhead to his right, saw blood red and black beneath his skin. Again he tried to breathe, and again pain bright as sunfire lanced through him. He couldn't breathe! He couldn't breathe! His vision blurred, and a blackness ran across the world—a blackness lit by the light of innumerate stars.

And there, against them—for that final, fleeting moment—he saw the black knife-shape of an Imperial shuttle sailing, its ion drives blue and blazing...and he understood.

It had happened again. He had doubled again, his particles refracted, rippled across the quantum foam . . . and his second self was outside the shuttle.

It was enough to kill them both.

His last thought was of the Hand—of the *god*—that had killed him. How small he was by comparison, and how vast and strange was the inhuman universe.

It didn't matter, he decided, as all went black.

Whatever else was true, it had taken a god to kill him, and that was enough.

THE ARCHAENAUT

* * *

IT WAS THE INVENTION OF THE WARP DRIVE BY MEN LOYAL TO THE KING OF Avalon that turned the tide of the war against the Mericanii Dominion and their daimon machines. The Dominion of old colonized the light-years in and around Earth by means of vessels designed to move at relativistic speed, vessels that slipped further and further into the future the faster and faster they went. Who knows how many vestiges of the Dominion survived the downfall of Earth, or how long the scions of the God Emperor were at war against them? Perhaps some survive to this day.

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* * *

“IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN TORN APART,” said Lieutenant Phanu from the navigator’s seat. “Sensor grid clocked it running thirty-nine percent *C* when it hit the edge of the system. There shouldn’t be anything left after an impact at that speed.”

“It could have been a glancing blow,” said Captain Misra, pulling herself forward so that she hung in freefall behind Phanu’s chair.

“Some glancing blow, ma’am!” Phanu replied, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice. He thumbed a couple controls, threw switches in sequence, relayed a comment to the helmsman at his side.

“Do we have a visual yet?” the captain asked.

Phanu shook his head. “Too far out. Won’t see anything for half an hour, I wager. Assuming we can catch it at all.”

From her place back and to port, the comms officer chimed in, “Do you think it’s a ship, captain?”

“Command thinks it is,” Misra replied, peering intently out the alumglass canopy, as if expecting the answer to be written out there somewhere in the ink-dark of space. If it was so written, it was written in ink itself, and was thus invisible.

The *object* had first registered on the edge of Aglovale system three days prior, when it struck an asteroid in deep orbit. The collision had cost the interloper nearly all its tremendous speed and had set it on a new trajectory—not skirting the heliopause, but tumbling down the gravity well in-system toward Aglovale’s twin suns. It had taken the better part of the first day for news to reach command on the home planet, and just as long for orders to bounce to Fort Caspian, where Misra and the crew of the *ISV Defiant* had their berth orbiting Lot, the system’s farthest, coldest little world.

“It could as easily be an asteroid,” said Edevane, the science chief.

“At forty percent C?” Phanu said. “Pretty damned unlikely.”

“More likely than a ship,” Edevane replied. “There’s no distress beacon. No heat signature.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” Phanu said. “Might be busted up pretty bad. Riding momentum.”

“Let’s not leap to conclusions, Michael,” Edevane said. “We don’t know anything yet.”

“I’m not leaping anywhere, doctor,” the navigator said. “Just thinking ahead.”

Edevane grunted, prompting the captain to clear her throat. “Lysander, Michael, enough.”

“Aye, ma’am,” they both said in unison.

Captain Cassia Misra shut her eyes. It was bad enough dealing with the two men’s posturing back on the station with nothing to do. Far worse to deal with it in the heat of the moment. Edevane and Phanu were both good officers, but prickly and too similar to ever truly cooperate. They needed different ships, but Aglovale’s System Defense had too few, and so far from the home planet, there simply wasn’t much opportunity for reassignment.

Patrolling their borders with infinity had not been quite as romantic as she’d imagined when she enlisted in the Baron’s fleet. Not once in her seven years as captain of the *Defiant* had the system been attacked by outworld barbarians, and only once in the six years prior—when an *exonaut* cruiser had sailed into the system in hope of finding fuel and a place to sell their wares—had anything happened outside the routine. The *exonauts* had been given fuel but denied the right to make planetfall by the Baron’s fleet. They’d too much of the stink of machines about them, or so old Captain Blinn had said. Misra had missed the *exonaut* affair. She’d been stationed on the ground then, chained to a flight control console in the old capital, but Blinn told her the *exonaut* captain had been eight feet tall and wore an exoskeleton to protect himself from Aglovale’s crushing gravity. It had been a *part* of him, or so old Blinn said.

Misra shuddered.

For just about three thousand years, the Sollan Empire had been expanding, growing out from the ashes of ruined Earth, carried farther and farther on faster and faster ships. It seemed like every other year they were

launching new peregrinations, new seed ships and new families for new worlds. Aglovale was a minor demesne, a system of little consequence on the borders of Imperial space. There were times Misra thought about changing her commission, signing on with the Emperor's own, leaving her home system for a post that really mattered . . .

But that was all a dream, and she knew it. Aglovale was home, had been home all her life.

And there was a mission, at any rate.

"We should be in position now," Phanu said, leaning back in his seat. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "You may wish to strap in, captain. If we need to move suddenly . . ."

She didn't need for him to finish the thought; she found her place in the command seat behind and to center. They'd set an intercept course to catch the object as it fell in system, and all they had to do was wait. Assuming Phanu had done his calculations properly, they lay directly in the path of . . . whatever it was. Their mission was simple: identify it. If it was only an asteroid, as Edevane speculated, they would vaporize it rather than let it pass and pose a threat to the inner system. If it was anything else, well . . .

Safely strapped in her chair, Misra said, "Are we ready to launch probe buoys?"

"Aye, ma'am," said the helmsman to Phanu's right. "On your mark."

"Fire."

The *Defiant* juddered slightly, and two points like flares shot past the bow of the ship, glittering the dark ahead. They diverged, forming a triangle with the *Defiant* at the vertex, each shooting off smaller flares as they went, each flare a smaller sensor buoy, forming a net in space between them and the target. "I want eyes on as soon as possible!" she said, "Let's get a look at this thing."

"We've got it!" Phanu's voice cracked the tense silence.

"Put it on monitor," Misra said.

The holograph display in the bridge's center glowed to life, and a series of confused, reddish images displayed themselves. Each was not perfectly three-dimensional, but a kind of bas relief snapshot where the probes' long-range scanners took snapshots of the *thing* as it tumbled toward them. It was hard to get a precise look. The radar scans betrayed contours, could guess at size and scope, but the material and color of the object was still a mystery.

"It's not that big," said the comms officer.

"It's bigger than we are," Edevane interjected. "Two-point-one kilometers."

That was nearly three times the length of the *Defiant*. Misra frowned, "Can you composite the images? I want a sense of what we're looking at, Lysander."

"Already on it," the science officer replied. Each radar ping had captured a different profile of the thing falling into their system, a different snapshot, like photographs taken of a sculpture from all sides. Edevane bent over his terminal, fingers tapping as he attempted to align one image with the next.

On the holograph before the captain, the image of the *thing* took form.

"That isn't an asteroid," Phanu said, peering round his seat to look at it on the monitor tube.

"So it would seem," Edevane said in answer.

The vessel had the look of some metal mushroom, or of the hilt of a gladiator's sword. A huge, round shield plate stood at one end, badly chipped along one edge, a perfect circle no more. In its shadow, stretching from the center like a stem, lay the main axis and chassis of the ship itself, a broad ring rotated not far behind the shield plate, and behind that a great mast protruded up and down from the core shaft, and from each extremity a tangle of confused geometry fluttered. At the far end, opposite the shield,

the stem swelled until it was twice its original size. There must be clustered the drive core and the might engines that had carried her across the stars.

In hushed tones, the comms officer voiced the thought Misra knew she at least had been having. “I’ve never seen a ship like that.”

Misra had seen ships with shield plates once or twice, the older bulk-freighters that plied the spaceways sometimes used them to guard their delicate hulls against micrometeor impacts and so on. Modern ships relied on hypercarbons, like the Adamant patented and produced by Hopper Industries, to create hulls impervious to that kind of damage. But she’d never seen one attached to so narrow a chassis before, and those masts, the confused tangles on the holograph . . . were they solar sails?

“Could be *exos*,” Phanu said. “They use spinships, don’t they? See the ring?”

“They’re not under thrust,” the helmsman said.

“Try hailing,” Misra ordered the comms officer. “All frequencies. Go.”

“Unidentified ship, this is the *Defiant*. You are entering Sollan Imperial space. This system is under the protection of Baron Constantine Martel. Identify yourself.” Nothing. “Unidentified ship, this in the *Defiant*. Identify yourself.”

The comms officer looked round at Misra, who made a gesture for quiet.

“They’re dead in the water, ma’am,” said the helmsman. “We’re picking up what might be an emergency reactor. Life support may be intact, but they’re not under thrust. Primary systems are all down. They were coasting on their way in-system. They’re dead as dead, I’m sure.”

Less sure herself, Misra ordered the comms officer to patch her through. Taking an instant to catch her breath, the captain keyed her microphone. “Unidentified ship, this is Captain Cassia Misra of the *ISV Defiant*. We are in position to render assistance should you require. Please reply.”

Silence. Total and absolute.

“Michael,” Misra addressed Lieutenant Phanu, “How long until they’re on us?”

“Nine minutes, twenty seconds,” he said, checking his readout. “They’re closing fast.”

Misra swore under her breath. “Scramble the lighters. I want grapnels on that ship. We need to stabilize their orbit and figure out where in Earth’s black face they came from.”

* * *

IT TOOK hours to rein the wild vessel in. The *Defiant* launched its full complement of lighter craft, and the smaller ships—using magnetic grapnels—caught and tethered the strange ship. Working in tandem, the flight crews—two men to a lighter—used their attitudinal jets to stabilize the broken vessel’s wild tumble. Firing retros, they bled much of what remained of the ship’s velocity and slid her smoothly into orbit around Aglovale’s twin suns. Misra watched those suns through the canopy that fronted the *Defiant*’s bridge. So far away they were that almost they seemed lost among the other stars, the bright white one with its duller, red companion, like mismatched eyes.

Tearing her eyes away, Misra studied the images on the comm console to her left, where a bank of monitors showed visions the lighter craft had taken of the derelict. Its hull glowed white as snow, as the streaks of cloud that mottled Aglovale’s green surface, with here and there the shadow of a scratch or pockmark from some long-ago collision. Misra floated free of her seat and pulled herself over the console, black hair floating off her left shoulder in its braid.

“Are we sure it’s one of ours?” she asked.

“Human, do you mean?” asked Lieutenant Edevane. “It looks the part.”

“But are there any markings? Words?”

“Not that we’ve seen,” the comms officer replied.

Phanu interjected as was his custom. “If they’ve been out in the black long enough, radiation’s probably done in the paint job.”

Edevane grumbled something. Misra caught the word *obviously*, but said nothing.

“If it’s *exos*, it could be . . .” the comms officer’s voice trailed off in horror. “Machines.”

Misra and a couple of the others made warding gestures. Phanu cursed. The *exonauts* and other outworld barbarians did not cleave to the Imperium’s laws forbidding the use and manufacture of artificial intelligence. For so many, the specter of the Foundation War and the Mericanii Totality still loomed large, and though it was written in the *Chant of Earth* that the first Emperor had smashed the machines forever, there were many who believed it was only a matter of time before hubris and human sin brought the horrors of the homeworld screaming back to blacken the stars. The *exonauts* flirted with such horrors, it was said, and if what Blinn had told her of the refugees who’d come to Aglovale was true, Misra was ready to believe even the darkest rumors.

“From the dominion of steel, O Mother, deliver us,” she prayed, and traced a circle on her forehead. She was far from the most pious observer of the faith, but was it not said that even the most ardent skeptic cries out to Mother Earth and Emperor in the face of the unknown? She exhaled sharply through her nose. “If it is *exos*, we needn’t fear. You know the protocol. If anyone’s alive, detain them. Question them. Turn them back. If not, we strip the ship and launch it into one of the suns.”

Her words—or the sharp reminder of protocol they carried—seemed to comfort the bridge crew. Misra studied the images another minute then in silence. The ship *looked* human enough. The silver foil of the solar sails, crumpled and twisted where they hung torn from their masts, had the look of many a satellite or orbital yacht she’d seen plying the spaceways above

the skies of Aglovale, but surely mankind could not be the only creatures to have developed such things in the galaxy. There *were* other peoples, other races—primitive by comparison, to be sure, less developed than man. But they needn't all be so. As a girl, Misra had watched holos about the tree-dwelling Niawangu who—six-limbed—dwelt amid the bottomless jungles of Marakand, never touching the ground. They were savages, little better than the forefathers of man who had carved rude symbols into the mouths of caves, but surely not all that dwelt among the stars were so backwards.

What if it's . . . aliens?

The thought had chewed at the corners of her mind since the call came in, since they'd been dispatched from Fort Caspian. It wasn't likely—that much she knew—but it was possible that she, Cassia Alexandra Misra, daughter of a civil servant, granddaughter of an urban farmer, would be the first human being in history to make contact with another race capable of sailing the dark between the stars.

"We need to prepare a boarding party," she said. "Edevane, I want you with me, and twenty of the men."

"You're going yourself?" the science officer turned in his seat, bright eyes widening. "Captain, this is very irregular! Protocol dictates—"

Misra made a slashing gesture with one hand, "Don't cite the regs to me, Lysander. I'm going." She did her best to float imposing in the center of the bridge, eyes narrow. No one else challenged her, and after a brief pause, she said, "Mister Phanu, you have the bridge."

* * *

THE CAPTAIN HAD a brief glimpse of her armored frame in the window of the hatch before it opened. Her armor, like that of her men, had been purchased from the Imperial Legions and repainted in the Baron's red and gold. Their faces all lay hid behind close-fitting plates of black glass, their

necks protected by Romanesque neck-flanges. The suits themselves were bulky, but fit well, heavy though the ceramic plating was over the environment suit with its thick layer of sintered armor gel. They looked larger than any human ought to be, like squat statues of red-painted marble with fields of onyx for faces.

Chess men.

The door opened on vastness and silence, and for a beat all Misra could hear was the rasp of her own breathing. She hated space, strange as that was for the captain of a starship to admit, and so focused on the deck of the white ship beneath her feet to ground her universe. She could not see the *Defiant* when she looked up, though she knew it was there, black against that greater blackness. They'd ridden a shuttle across to the other ship, parked it on the main column of the vessel not far from where the masts rose and fell from that central spine. Still looking up through the tatters of the silver sails in search of her own ship, Cassia knew a moment of vertigo, fearing to fall into that bottomless night. She shook herself. The electromagnets in her boots were working fine. She would not fall.

"Find a hatch!" she ordered via the common band, stepping down from the ramp to the gently curving surface of the craft. The main shaft could not have been more than two hundred feet in diameter, and its surface curved away to either side. The base of the mast lay dead ahead, canted at a slight angle where they had not landed directly in line. Her men swarmed out after her, moving in pairs. They hurried right and left, following the curve of the hull, moving in the strange, hot-footed way men must when wearing the iron boots that kept them clamped to the hull, high-stepping and awkward.

"See anything, Captain?" Phanu's voice sounded in her ear.

"Nothing yet," she answered. "Don't you have eyes on?"

"We do. Just asking."

Keeping a hand on her sidearm, Captain Misra stomped forward along the curving hull. The surface was far from smooth. Conduits ran bracketed

to the hull, coated in places with ice, and raised panels rose as much as a foot, giving the place the appearance of some horribly paved road. And there were hooks and hard points where workers might tether a line, or bits of more delicate machinery hid under grates. It was an ugly, rough vessel, and ahead, beyond the masts, Misra saw the fat end of the engine cluster rising like white hills. Looking back and over the squat, beetle-shape of their shuttle, she could see the ring section still spinning, and the gray shadow of the shield plate a thousand feet high.

“Found it, ma’am!” came the call. “Far side. Base of the mast!”

Misra acknowledged receipt and pointed for the four men of her guard to head right and counterclockwise around the shaft of the ruined vessel. The door was lozenge-shaped and built at an angle into the structure where the solar sail mast rose from a turret two thirds of the length of the spine from the forward plate. A manual lever stood vertical on the right side of the sealed portal, clamped in place and covered in peeled flecks of paint that once might have been yellow and black but were so sun-bleached and faded they recalled old bones.

Seeing it, Lieutenant Edevane said, “Human or no, they’re right-handed.”

“I’m sorry?” Misra asked as Lysander brushed past her to the door. Behind him, the captain signaled her men to take up positions at either side of the airlock.

Edevane didn’t answer, but fiddled with the clamps that secured the lever in place.

“Do we need a breaching charge?” Misra asked.

“No no!” came Edevane’s reply. He’d freed the clamps already and gripped the lever. “Black planet!” He cursed. “Thing’s corroded. You man!” He pointed to the soldier at his right, and gesturing to the lever, said, “You push. I pull. Savvy?”

The other man tapped his helmet twice to signal he understood and joined Lysander in torquing the handle. It ground an inch, and Misra swore she could feel the faint squeal of metal on metal through her boots as they did so. Edevane swore again, but an instant later the corrosion gave way, and the lever slammed down.

It took three men pulling to get the airlock hatch open, but open it they did. The bulkhead was nearly a hand's span thick and slightly curved, and the glass in the window was just as thick. True glass, then—not the aluminum ceramic that passed for glass in most starships. That wasn't all, there were markings stenciled on the inside of the hatch, letters Misra didn't recognize. Judging by the red arrows, they were instructions for operating the manual release on the inside, but they were in no alphabet Misra had ever learned to read.

Edevane frowned at it. "Human after all," he said.

"Can *you* read it?" Misra asked.

The lieutenant peered up at her, "It's English. Old-style English. You see it on *exo* ships."

"*Exos*?" Misra repeated the word, unable to stop the welter of disappointment bubbling from her depths. She had dared to hope—if only for a passing moment—that it was inhumans. Too much to hope for, she guessed. She shook her head to clear it. No sense getting lost in childish dreams when there was work to do. It may not have been aliens, but it *was* the *exonauts*, and that was dangerous enough. There was no telling what might lie in wait behind that inner door.

Edevane nodded, let two of the armed men file in. "Some of their clans still speak the old tongue. Never picked up the standard. Too isolated."

Misra accepted this explanation with a tight nod and the double tap that signified she'd heard him. "Can we get the inner door open?"

"It *is* open, captain!" called one of the others. "Internal environment's well compromised!"

Captain Misra shouldered her way past Lieutenant Edevane and into the airlock, triggering her suit's low-beams as she went. Their light illuminated padded white walls and silver panels with glass buttons and dead readouts, controls—she guessed—for the defunct airlock. A ladder exited through a hole in the floor, descending the mast turret toward the central column of the vessel itself. One of her men had already reached it, and—diving through it head-first—pulled himself down. It was a strange, disorienting experience, even after all her years aboard the *Defiant*, a stark reminder that they were far from the warm embrace of Aglovale's gravity well.

A moment later, sconce lights embedded in the wall of the antechamber flickered to life, reacting, perhaps, to the opening of the outer door or the movement of men within the room. Following her over the threshold, Lysander Edevane said, "Something's still working, at least. Emergency power?"

"We'll have to find out," Misra said. "We need to find the bridge. See if we can't access their computers."

"There may be survivors," Edevane said, prodding one of the dead displays in the hopes of coaxing some life out of it.

"With the main cabin compromised?" Misra asked.

"Could be on ice, or—if they're *exonauts*—who knows?" his voice darkened. "They might be playing dead."

Misra took his point well enough. They'd both heard enough horror stories about bodies being pulled in from the black of space, only to be reanimated by machines impregnating the sacred flesh to wreak havoc upon the men who'd salvaged the apparently dead sailors. Misra keyed all comms, spoke to her team. "Stay alert. Keep an eye out for any bodies, or any signs of a fugue pod. Don't take any chances. Assume any dead you find are hostile."

"Ma'am?" came the confusion over the line.

"Just play it safe, Ginherroc."

“Yes, ma’am.”

The captain turned to her science officer, trying to see his face through the tinted black visor. “Forward, then,” she said, and followed her men to the ladder, imitating the awkward diving motion that uncoupled her feet from the deck so that she climbed *up* the down ladder and into the central shaft. More lights had flickered on ahead of her, following those of her men who’d taken the lead. Here and there one refused to light, or sputtered and died. How long had it been adrift, riding its momentum across the stars at a respectable fraction of the speed of light? How many years or decades had flowed by that hull and leached the color from it? And whence had it come? From what dark station between the stars and far from the light of the Empire had it been launched? And to what purpose?

Misra hauled herself forward, following her men along the core shaft, which she guessed ran the entire length of the vessel from forward plate to engine cluster, though bulkheads were shut to fore and aft. Misra propelled herself after her men, Edevane close behind. More lights pulsed on as her people glided by, using rungs bracketed on all sides of the tubular shaft to press forward or slow themselves as their momentum became too great. Concave doors matching the curvature of the tunnel stood open or closed at intervals along the hall and at ninety-degree angles to one another. At one of these she halted, peered inside with her suit lamps.

It was a storage room, and small crates within floated behind the netting that held them in their niche. The contents of one opened locker drifted like detritus in the bottom of a long-neglected well. Ration packs in silver foil, spoiled long ago, shimmered in the light of her torch beam, and what looked like a pair of brass dice on a thin chain.

Human, after all.

The next open door seemed a kind of primitive lavatory. She recognized the waste elimination systems for what they were at once—some things never changed—but the shower stalls, if such they could be called, were not

the sonic booths she was used to, but simple alcoves equipped with sanitary napkin dispensers and privacy screens. She'd seen such things in history lessons at the academy, and tried to imagine the animal stink of the place when it had had air, nose wrinkling.

"They didn't design this place with boots in mind, did they?" groused one of the men.

He was right. Though ladder rungs ran along the sides of the shaft, there was no sense of *decks* at all. The chambers opening on four sides had all been built such that their floors were all aligned with the engine cluster beneath them, so that the ship might impart some imitation of gravity while under thrust. It was primitive, but ingenious in its way, that the crew might inhabit the spire while under the thrust, and the spin section ahead while not.

Ships like the *Defiant* took into account magnetized boots such as those they all wore, and so patterned their design more after the fashion of ocean-going vessels, with decks perpendicular to the axis of thrust. The warp drives used for faster-than-light travel imparted no inertia at all, and so ships like the *Defiant* spent most of their flight time not under what any ancient physicist would have recognized as *thrust*.

"Help me with this!" The words of the soldier ahead shook Misra from her reflection on the strangeness of the vessel, and looking forward she saw four men attempting to slide back the double doors of the bulkhead. The inner door had partly failed, had been open a couple inches—wide enough to let any air there may have been out, but not wide enough to admit any one of them.

The men groaned over the common band as they braced themselves against opposing walls—no easy task in freefall. But the door ground open, and when it had traveled a few inches, some long-dormant system kicked in and rolled the portal back.

“What’s all this?” Edevane asked, casting his suit lamp over the room beyond. The walls were honeycombed with little round apertures—each perhaps five centimeters wide. The section continued for perhaps five meters before giving way to a ring of controls that girdled the entire passage. He drifted to one wall, seized handles between banks of the silver-capped apertures. Misra imagined she could hear the man squinting as he tapped one of the circles, wiped a thin caul of frost from the end. “Cold storage,” he mused aloud, and leaned in to read some label on the end cap. Reacting to his touch, the little disc slid outward, outgassing as it went, revealing a narrow cylinder three times longer than it was wide, with glass sides revealing the blue fluid within.

“Lysander, leave it!” Misra ordered.

But the science chief leaned further in, focusing his suit light on the glass sides to better peer within. “Earth and Emperor!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” Misra asked, unable to help herself.

“A child!” he said, holding up thumb and forefinger about two centimeters apart. “An embryo! About this big!”

Misra felt her heart tighten in her chest. “Human?”

“Well, I’m no biologist, but I’d say so,” Edevane said, and tapped the tube again. It slid neatly back into place. He pushed back from the walls, caught hold of a rung near what passed for the ceiling, given Misra’s vantage point. “There could be . . . ten thousand of them here! Maybe more. It’s hard to say!” He turned to look down at his captain where she clung to the wall opposite. “Cassia, I think this is a colony seed ship.”

“Never heard of the exos trying to launch a colony before,” she said.

“Aglovale’s pretty far out,” said one of the men. “Maybe they thought it was uninhabited.”

“You think?” asked the man called Ginherroc.

“Anything’s possible,” the first man said.

“What about the crew?” asked another.

“Maybe they had to evacuate?” Ginherroc said.

“Keep moving,” Misra said. “We haven’t found the bridge yet. It’s good that these systems are still working. We’ll find our answers ahead.” But she was unable to shake the sense that something was very wrong about all this. The ship had no warp drive, of that she was certain. They would have seen the engines on their approach. She had never heard of a colony seed ship without warp drive.

How long were they in coming here?

“Captain, Lieutenant Edevane. Door’s open!” said one of the soldiers. He’d gone on ahead to the round door at the extreme end of the core shaft and found it functional.

Misra and Edevane broke off their conversation, and both kicked off the walls to reach the door. The room beyond the door revolved slowly, a great wheel turning floor to wall to ceiling in a steady clockwise motion. They had reached the ring section, Misra realized, and the two doors that faced each other across the vestibule turned with the great spokes that connected that ring to the central spire. A third door lay dead ahead, in the center of the far wall but it was locked. One of the soldiers was prodding a control panel as she entered, but nothing changed.

“We may need to cut our way in,” he said.

“Hold that thought,” Edevane interjected. “There might be atmo on the far side still.” He turned back through the door whence they had come, then back to Misra. “Could be an airlock.”

Misra chewed her lip. “We won’t all fit in here.”

“We can leave the lads to search downship. Might be something in engineering anyhow.”

The captain nodded. If Edevane was right, it was better not to force the door, and if he was wrong, well, they’d be separated long.

As the lieutenant floated to the door to shout his orders, Misra radioed the ship. “Mister Phanu, can you run a scan of the forward sections? There’s

power coming from somewhere. I'd like to know where that is."

"On it," the gruff lieutenant replied. "Any idea whose ship it is?"

Misra hesitated only a moment. "Lysander thinks its *exos*. All the signs are in Old English."

"English?" Phanu's scowl crackled over the comm. "Talking pre-war English? Could be Mericanii."

"That's enough, Michael," Misra snapped. "The Mericanii are three thousand years gone."

"I'm just kidding, captain," she could hear the laughter in the navigator's voice. "Watch out for robots!"

"I said that's enough!" the captain snapped, but smiled beneath her visor. "Anything on scan?"

"Still going."

Edevane had returned by then and cycled the rear door, sealing the two officers and five men in the low-lit vestibule. "Try the door!" he said, pointing to the man nearest the panel. Misra pressed herself nearer the rotating wall, grabbed a handle to pull herself away from the others clustered near the center. Her lower body thudded against the wall as she turned, was lifted above her compatriots to better see the door as Edevane's fellow tapped again at the controls.

Again. Nothing.

"Is it dead?" she asked.

"I don't know!"

"This is interesting," came Phanu's voice on the comms. "On a lark I spectrographed the light coming from the windows on the forward section. There's air in there. Good air, but cold."

Edevane spoke up. "Explains the door."

"Can we cycle this room?" Misra asked. "Use it like an airlock?"

"I don't see any controls like that," said the man at the door.

"Michael?" Misra asked. "Any ideas?"

As if in answer, a green light filled the vestibule, and a moment later the door just above where Misra clung to the rotating perimeter of the room opened, and a cold, white light flickered to life. A dry rasp of air—thin as the last breath of a dying man—rushed from the tunnel into the vestibule, making Misra think of the tombs of the desert kings of old her father had talked about when she was just a girl. The men all moved with well-oiled reflexes, drawing reactionless phase disruptors and taking aim. But there was no intruder, only an empty stretch of corridor, of ladder descending to the ring section above.

Below?

“Was that you, Damien?” Edevane asked the fellow on the controls.

Damien shrugged. “Might have been?”

“Captain, let me go first!” called one of the others, but Misra had already hauled herself through the opening, her own disruptor in her hands. They were right behind her, pulling themselves over the lip and into the spoke that descended toward the ring. The captain caught hold of the ladder built into one side and pushed herself down. The ring section below was not spinning enough to create the full effects of simulated gravity, had slowed over who knew how many years, but still she felt a phantom weight as she descended, and when her feet were on the lip above the lower door she did not float away, light though she was.

The lower door opened to admit her, and a rush of frigid air filled the shaft above, blowing her armor’s gold-fringed tunic up like the skirt of some silly little girl. Edevane and the others were just above her, so she leaped down through the aperture to the deck of the ring below. She landed cat-footed, gun raised, in the center of what looked for all the world just like one of the rec rooms back on Fort Caspian. Low couches—black against the white walls and floor—carved out their square sitting areas around low tables, all built into the floor. But the walls were bare of any decoration, and a thin layer of frost lay on almost everything.

Edevane swung off the bottom of the ladder at her side—not one to leap as she had done—and the others came clambering down. “Living quarters?” he asked, looking round.

“Looks like.”

“Still no sign of the crew. Fugue, do you reckon?”

Misra shook her head. “I didn’t see any creches, did you?”

“Maybe down by the engines?”

A distant sound broke the sepulchral quiet of the place, and all seven of them jumped, pointing disruptors. What looked like a screwdriver rolled into sight from around a counter up ahead, and hurrying towards it, Misra saw a metal toolbox smashed open on the ground. She could see where it had rested on the counter—a clear spot stood dark against the glimmering frost. She stooped to pick it up. It was a screwdriver, a common screwdriver. She held it up for Edevane and the others to see.

Then a huge, white shape burst from over the counter and hurled itself at her. Edevane shouted. Too late! Whatever it was, it tackled Misra to the ground, knocked the disruptor from fingers suddenly nerveless. Cassia Misra reacted fast as she could, cuffed her assailant in what she guessed was the side of its head.

“Don’t shoot!” Edevane shouted, “You’ll hit the captain!”

Man-shaped it was and huge, hulking and padded beneath layers of what felt like rubber and kevlar. A hand seized Misra by the jaw, forcing her head back. Her gun could not have gone far. She felt for it, hand slapping at the deck beneath her. Where were the others?

There!

The creature’s huge hand closed on hers and the gun in it, and before she could retaliate—before she could react—it was gone, rolled off of her and onto one knee.

“Stop!” it shouted, pointing the gun at her, at them. “ðæts fɑr ɪnʌf!” His words were strange, not wholly unfamiliar, but *wrong*. Misra slid backward

where she lay, ashamed to have been caught off guard so easily. Seeing her movement, her assailant snapped the weapon toward her. “hu ɑɪ ju? aɪdɛntəfaɪ ʝɑɪsɛlvz!”

Guns glared at each other across the space between the demon in white and Misra’s men.

She didn’t understand.

“dɪd ju ətæk maɪ ʃɪp?”

Now that she had gained the space to breathe, Misra understood what it was that had attacked her. It was a man, or nearly one, clad in an environment suit of heavy white cloth over layers of padded material. The helmet was not close-fitting at all, but a white dome with a bronzed visor that hid his face—for *he* he certainly was. The voice was deeply masculine, but human as anything in the cosmos.

“hu ɑɪ ju?” he roared once more and, pointing the disruptor at the ground, he fired. The energy bolt flashed white in the dimness. “ɹɛbɔltz? ɪz ðæt ɪt?”

“Put the gun down!” Misra said, returning to her knees.

The man thrust the gun back in her face. His hand wavered. “ju dɔʊnt ʌndɜːstænd mi . . .” His words trailed away to nothing. No one moved for a long moment.

“Who are you?” Misra asked, taking advantage of the man’s faltering to stand. He turned to look at her, perhaps recognizing the feminine in her voice. How long had it been since he’d heard a woman’s voice? Or any man’s? Misra tapped her chest. “Misra,” she said. “Misra.”

“Misra?” the man echoed the word in his curious accent. Then with one bulky gauntlet he lifted his bronze visor with the air of a knight long afield.

The captain gasped, and sensed the same thrill of horror run through the others.

It was a man, indeed, but a man like and yet unlike any she had ever seen. He wore his blond hair in a short burr flat on top and nearly absent on

the sides. His face was broad and clean-shaven, strong-jawed and pale of skin, and Misra could tell that even were his padded suit removed he would be a big man, broad-shouldered and strong. But it was his eyes that drew hers, and those of all the others in the room.

They were solid silver, like twin pools of mercury in his otherwise unremarkable but handsome face. Like mirrors, they reflected all they saw, and seemed to glow with an inner light. And what was more, the left side of his head from his temple to behind his ear shone just as silver and gleamed with faint, blue light.

“Mother Earth!” swore one of the men, “He’s *exonaut*, all right.”

The stranger cocked his head, as confused by the strange *wrongness* of their words as they were by his, as though he could *almost* understand them. Lowering his stolen weapon, he said, “ʒθ?” And again, “Earth?”

“Earth?” Edevane asked.

“juɪ frəm ʒθ?” His jaw went slack, and it was only slowly that he lifted a hand to his own chest, jostling the air and water hoses fastened to the pack there. “hwɪʔ. Aɪm kə'mændʒ ælən hwɪʔ.”

“Wheeler?” Edevane echoed the man’s word. “Your name is Wheeler?”

The man nodded. Misra’s gun still wavered in his hands, half-raised.

“Edevane?” Misra asked.

“He’s speaking English, ma’am. *Old* English.”

“You understand him?”

“Not well,” said the lieutenant. “Never thought I’d have to *speak* it.” He lowered his own gun and advanced a step, his empty hands raised. Pointing at his black-visored face, he said, “Aɪm ɪdvɛɪn, ʔutənənt ʔaɪsændʒ ɪdvɛɪn.”

“Lieutenant?” Wheeler took a step back, raising his guns. “ʔutənənt fɔɪ hu? Hu du ju wɜ:k fɔɪ?”

Edevane glanced sidelong at his captain. “He wants to know who we work for, captain.”

“Tell him, Lysander!”

“We’re soldiers of the Sollan Empire,” Edevane said, words muddy as he stumbled through the *exonaut*’s unfamiliar tongue. “This system is ours. Who are you?”

“jɔɪz?” Wheeler said, shining eyes narrowing. “Yours? This system’s uninhabited. No one’s been out here. What’s the Sollan Empire?”

“What does he mean ‘what’s the Sollan Empire?’” Misra echoed when Edevane had repeated the strange sailor’s words. The Sollan Empire ruled over thousands of star systems—more than ten thousand, or so it was said! The Empire ruled over the ruins of Earth itself, safeguarded the homeworld in trust against the day the radiation faded and mankind was free to return and plant her hills anew. How could anyone—even one of the *exonauts*—not know of the Empire? “It doesn’t make sense.”

Edevane turned to the man called Wheeler, and again speaking the fellow’s arcane tongue, he said, “Who are you, exactly? What is this ship? What is your purpose here?”

“maɪ pəpəs?” Wheeler echoed. “My purpose? We’re a colony mission! Or we were.”

He continued on in that vein for a long moment, and when he was done, Edevane translated, saying: “He says their life support failed in transit.”

“What happened to the rest of the crew?” Misra asked.

Edevane repeated the question in halting, broken English.

“Dead,” the *exonaut* replied. That word, at least, had not changed as Old English and the Galactic Standard drifted further and further apart. Misra felt a twinge of sympathy for the lone sailor then. She could not imagine how long he had been alone, surviving off what ambient air remained in the vast ship, off the rebreather and the oxygen tanks left in storage.

Wheeler kept speaking then, continued for a long moment. Edevane hesitated for just a moment when he was done, asked a question in the *exo*’s aged tongue. “He says there were twelve of them.”

“Only twelve?” Misra was unable to keep the shock from her voice. There were three hundred on the *Defiant*, and it was less than half the volume. “What happened to them?”

Edevane asked.

“əplɔːsɪdɪd,” Wheeler said.

The lieutenant didn’t answer at once, so Misra asked, “What did he say?”

Edevane shook his head. “‘Uploaded?’” he said, repeating the *exonaut*’s word sound-for-sound.

The captain shook her head as well. The word was English, and what it might mean she couldn’t begin to guess. “We need to radio Fort Caspian,” she said, “get up with command. Tell them it’s another *exo* incursion.” She studied Wheeler’s face, the mirrored eyes and implant on his temple. The mingling of flesh and machine was strictly forbidden. That was why the *exonauts* existed in the first place. They had chosen to flee, chosen exile rather than rejoin the human family after the War, after the Advent and annihilation of Earth and her machines.

The last *exonaut* ship had simply needed fuel and had been sent on its way, but Wheeler’s ship was in no state to sail, and so he would have no choice but to submit to Imperial rule. His eyes would have to be removed, and the *thing* in his head with them. If new eyes could not be found or grown for him, he would live blind but *human* as a guest of the Baron’s. It was the law.

Something of the interloper’s earlier behavior clicked in Misra then, and she turned her gaze back to Edevane. “Lysander, ask him where he came from.”

The lieutenant did as he was ordered, repeating her words in the stumbling, archaic way.

Wheeler’s silver eyes blinked, and he frowned at them as if this was the most foolish question in all the galaxy.

“hwɛɪ dɪd wi kəm fɪəm?” he asked, repeating Edevane’s question. Misra’s gun wavered in his confused hand. “aɪ . . . ʔθ. Wiɪ fɪəm ʔθ.”

Lysander Edevane might have been transmuted to stone. He stood there, utterly still, a suit of armor on display in some museum.

“What is it?” Misra asked, marking the unease that rippled through the other men to see their lieutenant’s reaction. But she already knew, could sense the answer in the way Wheeler had reacted to one of the soldier’s oaths.

Earth.

“He’s from Earth,” Edevane said.

“What?” one of the others interjected.

“Impossible!” Misra replied. “Earth was destroyed three thousand years ago!”

Picking up on the fear and anger in the voice of Misra and her men, Wheeler took a step back, raised his gun. “hwət aɪ ðeɪ seɪŋ?” His voice had sharpened, and clearly Misra heard the fear in it.

Edevane didn’t answer him. “It’s not impossible,” he said, turning to face her. “This ship is old. Pre-warp. If she could push light speed. Get right up against C . . .”

Misra could only stare at her lieutenant. He was talking about relativity. Special relativity. That hadn’t been relevant to space travel—not really—since Mann and Ibson created the warp drive. Modern ships like her *Defiant* were not even capable of achieving near-light speeds, relying instead on fusion engines for short, hard burns and ion drives and even solar sails to boost momentum over long distances. Warp drives sidestepped the issues of relativity, kept sailors from slipping away thousands of years into the future.

From traveling through time.

“Three thousand years . . .” Misra’s voice was shaking. “That would mean . . . that would make him . . .”

Edevane was well ahead of her. “Mericanii. This is a Mericanii ship!” His hand snapped back up, disruptor pointed at Wheeler’s chest. The other men stiffened, retrained their weapons on the target.

It wasn’t possible. Couldn’t be possible. Beneath her helmet, Cassia Misra’s mouth hung open. The Mericanii were gone. William the Great had stamped them out, tore up their iron colonies by the roots and hounded them back to the green hills of Earth where they and their machines had made their final stand. She looked at Wheeler. He was no *exonaut*, but an *archaenaut*, an ancient sailor borne by the winds of light from some half-remembered history. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. Never in all her wildest dreams had she thought such a thing might be possible, might happen *to her*.

History did not come to life, did not sail out of the dark between the stars and menace her sleeping world. History was for books, for holographs and children. Not for the light of day.

But history had come to Aglovale, and to her.

“hwæts goðm an?” Wheeler asked, pointing his stolen gun now at Edevane.

How many billions had the Mericanii and their machine masters killed, and on how many worlds? How many people had died in the name of their *progress*, their giant leap forward? The machines would not tolerate any man or woman to live free of their network. All were to be incorporated, that the machines might set them *free*. Of suffering, of pain, of the iniquities of ordinary life. Of rank and difference itself. Such equity demanded the machines to enforce it, and enforce it they had. Every blade of grass that stood tall was cut down, and every crawling weed was straightened, and all who would not kneel were destroyed lest they threaten the Dominion.

There were worlds besides Earth where even still no life grew, and it was said that when the war was done, only the smallest portion of mankind yet stood free.

“They’re dead!” Misra objected, looking at Wheeler. “The Mericanii are dead.”

“Looks like this one was a long time coming here,” Edevane said. “What should we do? You know the Protocols. If there’s a *machine* on board . . .”

Misra knew the rules as well as any officer. Three thousand years later, and every man and woman on every ship from every world in the Imperium was still made to memorize the Avalon Protocols.

“This ship has to be destroyed.” She looked to Wheeler. *And every man on it.*

“hwæts goðm an?” Wheeler asked again, clearly not guessing his danger. And how could he? He had come from a different world. A different universe. A universe forever changed by the actions of the power he had served—if he had served them.

“Ask him!” Misra asked him. “Name. Rank. Serial number. Ask him, Lysander!”

Lysander did as he was ordered.

The man called Wheeler did not lower his gun. “aī toðld ju!” he said, still perhaps not understanding. “aī æm kəməndæ ælən hwitæ, ju ɛs ɛs æməzən, əv ðə pipəlz junaitid steits əv əmɛrəkə.”

Captain Misra did not need Edevane to translate the *archaenaut*’s words. Strange though his accent was, his last words needed no translation.

A Merican.

6

GUTTER BALLET

* * *

IN THE IMPERIUM, IT IS SAID THAT AMONG THE EXTRASOLARIANS, ALL MANNER of depravity is celebrated, seen as commonplace. Men are permitted to carve up their own bodies to suit some twisted vision. Still others augment their flesh with machines, while others sell their own blood that clones uncounted might live lives in bondage, and some...some cannibalize their own children for the hope of a longer life. But there are those who put such monsters down, sometimes despite themselves.

– *Originally published in No Game For Knights.*

* * *

THE GIRL WAS LESS than human—anyone with eyes could see. Still, the shape of her was persuasive, all leg and graceful lines. She moved like water, flowing over the cracked tiles of the office. Still, Simon could sense the tension in her, the nervousness betrayed by the way she held her head and the rapid darting of her eyes as she hurried to take in drab walls, the

exposed pipes, the low glow of the sconces, the peeling opera posters. The false moonlight fell through the oval windows behind Simon's desk, and the glare of neon cut the eye where the sign for the off-station imports shop blinked its wanton promise into the night.

"You Mister Fabray?" the girl asked. "The door said I could come down."

Had he forgotten to close up for the night? *Damn.*

"That's right, madam." Simon took his feet off the desk, shrugged his coat closed over his chest. The lights from his implant would not draw so much as a second glance here on Hyadon, but he was still enough the Empire-man to feel shame and even horror at the metal *thing* socketed to his chest. "And I'm sorry, but you'll have to come back tomorrow. It's late." His eyes flickered to the half-empty glass of cheap spirits on the desk by the hilt of his sword. He'd been about to go for dinner.

The air seemed to go out of the girl then. Her shoulders slumped, and her hair—rich black and smoother than oil—fell across her lovely face. Simon studied her, sure he'd been right. She wasn't human. She looked like one of the odalisques who languished in the courts of the great princes of Jadd. Her face was like graven marble, her features too perfect, too symmetrical; her skin too white and without blemish. She wasn't a machine, of that at least he was sure. She was a homunculus, grown and tailored cell by cell, her body built for—well, it wasn't gentlemanly to speculate.

"I don't suppose . . ." her eyes flickered to his face—amber and very, very large—then flicked away again. "Sir, it's my sister. I think she's been killed."

Damn. Simon raised a hand to his eyes and sat forward, shoving the half-filled glass of spirits away, its contents sloshing on the surface, distorting and scattering the images projected in the dark glass. Letting his hand fall, he said, "What's your name?"

The girl rallied almost at once, pressed her lips together as she lifted her head and squared those alabaster shoulders beneath the translucent plastic poncho she wore over her dress. “Eirene,” she said.

“Just Eirene?” Simon asked. It was an Imperial name, but her accent was all native to Hyadon, all Extrasolarian.

“Just Eirene,” she echoed, and taking in a breath added, as though she had almost forgotten it, “My sisters call me *Nines*.”

Simon blinked at her. “Serial number?”

“I’m sorry?” She took a step back. “Oh. Yes.” She made a gesture as if to remove the synthetic poncho, seemed to think better of it. “My sisters and I . . . we’re dancers. Part of a dancing company—Madame Vigran’s. Do you know it?” Her amber eyes darted to the opera posters on the wall opposite the exposed plumbing.

Simon shook his head. “Why don’t you take a seat?” He gestured to the chair opposite, and—pausing long enough to remove the poncho—she took the offered seat. Simon said nothing, only studied the girl as she perched herself on the very lip of the seat. She hardly moved. Even though distress etched itself like acid on her white face, her poise never faltered. He wondered how much of her dancer’s training was genetic, the result of RNA indoctrination and not years of careful practice.

She was struggling to find her words. It was a look he knew well. In this line of work he’d found for his second life, Simon Fabray was always seeing people on the worst days of their lives—or the day before it. This was one of the latter cases, he could tell. She’d said it herself, and said it again a moment later. “I think my sister’s been killed.”

Think. Her worst day was coming, then, would arrive when she *knew*. There was always the chance the girl was alive, but on Hyadon station, *missing* meant *dead*. If you were worth enough to ransom, the people expected to pay would know about it, and if you weren’t, well . . . most people were worth less than the organs that kept them running.

“Why’d you come to me?” he asked when at last the silence stretched to breaking.

Nines’s perfect face twisted into a frown. “You help people.”

“I’m a detective,” he said. “For those as can’t afford the bigger sec firms.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but you *help* people. I hear stories, Mister Fabray. About what you did for the Sisters of Mercy. About the Natalists Guild. They say you’re a knight. From the Empire.”

“I *was* a knight. Once,” Simon countered, hand going to the iron *thing* crouched where his heart used to be. “That was a long time ago.” The girl bit her lip, an affecting gesture, even through her distress. Simon chewed his own tongue a moment before asking, “What’s her name?”

Nines blinked. “What?”

“Your sister,” Simon said. “Another homunculus, is she?”

The girl flinched. “I . . . yes, sir. Her name was . . . is Maria.” With that, she reached into the bodice of her dress and fished out an ivory cameo the size of a gold hurasam. She pulled the chain from around her exquisite neck and set the pendant on the table between them.

The two mirrored faces repelled one another as Simon opened the cameo to reveal the projector concealed behind the carved motif of nymphs and flowers. A cone of faint, white light streamed forth, and within it the image of more than a dozen women stood arm-in-arm and bowed before lifting their faces, smiling at unheard applause. Each was pale as the woman opposite him, each black of hair, each amber-eyed, skinny but not androgynous, perfect in every way. Each wore matching red leotards cut to emphasize the sculpted shape of hip and thigh, and each girl’s face had been starkly painted after the fashion of all stage performers to emphasize the hard line of cheekbone and jaw.

The image froze, seventeen girls all smiling matching smiles.

“That’s her,” the girl called Nines said, poking her finger through the holograph of the girl third from the right. Simon could hardly tell them apart, though they were not quite identical.

“How long has she been missing?” he asked, trying to decide which of the girls in the image was the one seated in his dark office.

Eirene cleared her throat. “Three days.”

“She’s dead,” Simon said, and regretted his words as the girl’s shoulders collapsed. Her attention momentarily diverted, he dragged the hilt of his old sword across the desktop and vanished it into a pocket of his coat. Better not to leave the weapon lying around. It was an Imperial weapon, a knight’s weapon, and the last thing he wanted was her asking questions. Hearing the girl sniff, he said, “I’m sorry. But if it’s been this long, she’s floating in one of the canals.”

The homunculus clenched her tailored jaw. “I know that’s probably true, Mister Fabray. Really, I know it. I just want to know what happened to her.”

“And you didn’t go to your owner? What’s her name?”

“Madame Vigran?” The girl’s eyes went very wide. “Oh, no sir.” Again she bit her lip, hands twisting in her lap. “Maria was seeing a boy. Some sailor. She never told us his name. Madame Vigran would have had her caned if she knew.”

Leaning over his desk, Simon dragged the glass back toward himself and lifted it to drink. “She know now?”

“I mean . . . she knows Maria is missing, but we haven’t told her about the boy.” Nines had grown, if anything, even paler. “She’d have us all caned for keeping it a secret. She’s very hard on us.” The dancer ducked her head. “We’d not be living were it not for her. We owe her honesty. Owe her everything. It’s only that Maria was so . . . so happy. With her sailor, I mean. I didn’t want to take that from her. None of us did. And now she’s . . .” She choked, held a hand to her mouth and shut her eyes.

His glass drained, Simon shut the cameo, extinguishing the image of the ballerinas.

“It isn’t your fault, miss,” he said, trying to soothe her. From the way her shoulders tightened, Simon guessed that he’d failed. “You and your sisters: you’re clones, aren’t you?”

Letting her hand drop, Nines nodded stiffly. “Are you clones of *her*?”

The homunculus nodded again, and a moment later, “Yes.”

“I see.”

“She was a great dancer, in her day. From one of the great Mandari companies. We keep her legacy alive,” she smiled, and the light of it cut sharper than the neon through the oval windows behind Simon’s desk. “I think it’s wonderful. Don’t you?”

Simon touched his implant at the thought of something being kept alive, and grimaced. He’d been a corpse when Basil brought him to Hyadon station and paid for the machine whose burning candle replaced his ruined heart. The Extrasolarian machine—forbidden in the Empire—had saved his life, had *kept him alive*, but it came with a cost. He could never go home. With his false heart burning in his chest, his people would stone him for abomination.

There was something to be said for death, for letting things go.

For letting things end.

That was just the problem with these Extras. Mother Earth and Evolution intended man to live his day and die, but there were lengths men might obtain in defiance of natural order, prolonging life. Some were wholesome, such as porphyrogenesis practiced by the lords of the Empire, but most were not. Among the Extras, men carved out their brains and placed them in bodies of metal or jars of clear glass; or filled their bodies with unholy machines to replace their failing organs. There were whispers that some among the bonecutters in the city traded in new bodies entire—though Simon did not believe it—while others . . .

“I’m going to ask you just one question, miss,” Simon said, and again the girl’s posture stiffened, ready for flight. She chewed her lip, waiting. “What makes you think *she* didn’t kill your sister?”

Nines blinked. “Madame Vigran?” The girl shook her head furiously, her silken hair floating about her face. “No! Why? Never!” She almost laughed. “Why would she?”

Her confusion was itself almost funny. Like a bird so used to its cage it has mistaken the gilt bars for sunlight in an open sky, the girl who was not quite a girl could not see the truth when it was staring her plain in her gene-sculpted face. He laughed then, a harsh, rough sound, loud and unkind. “You’re spare parts, girl! A walking organ bank—you and your *sisters*. It’s not just her legacy you’re keeping alive. It’s *her*.”

Eirene stood so sharply she knocked the chair to the ground. She stepped back, nearly fell. Simon lurched to his feet, though he stood no chance of reaching her in time. But Eirene righted herself, skipping back several steps. “You can’t be serious!” she exclaimed. “Madame Vigran would never do that!”

“Then why are you halfway round the ring talking to some old guy in the hydroponics district?” he said. “You knew all along, girl. Don’t lie to me. Your *Madame* wouldn’t be the first to keep a harem of organ donors. It’s practically a cliché about you Extras where I come from. You had to know.”

The girl Eirene was silent, stood hugging herself beyond the overturned chair. Through the windows at Simon’s back, a light flared as the drive-glow of a flier slid past and set the panes to rattling. Though her lip trembled, she held herself still as any queen.

Simon crossed his arms, did not regain his seat. Though he’d risen to try and help her, he stayed standing to face her down, counting on his size and patrician scars to frighten her to speech. “Tell me the truth,” he said.

“I don’t . . .”

“You want me to kill her? Is that it?” he asked, and took an incongruous step back.

“The Sisters,” Eirene, called Nines, said. “You saved their convent from Yin’s men. You killed Yin.”

Simon’s face was as much a mask as those of the girls on the holograph. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You *help* people,” the homunculus insisted. “They said you help people.”

“You’re not people,” Simon said, voice cold as the space beyond the station’s superstructure. “And I’m not an assassin. You want one? Go down-spin to *Mauvancor*. You’ll find no shortage of cutthroats willing to take you on for a hurasam or an hour in a pod hotel with you.”

Eirene’s shoulders slumped, and her whole person seemed to sag like a glacier tumbling into the sea. “I’m not a whore, Mister Fabray,” she said.

“And I told you,” he said. “I’m not a killer.”

Silence unspooled between them, neither speaking. Neither moved. At length, Simon broke the stalemate, and circling back to his desk collected the short glass and the tall bottle not far from it. He thought better of the glass, and pulling the stopper free tipped the tasteless liquor down his throat. It burned as it went down, and he grimaced at his reflection in the purple light from the window. The white lines of surgical scars shone bright in the dim reflection, half-hidden by the shadow of his ill-shaven beard. After more than a hundred years of hard living and his fatal brush with death, his hair was starting to go gray at the roots, and there was a leathern cast to the skin of his face, amplified by the crooked profile of his once-broken nose.

Life is very long, he thought, and asked. “What do you want from me?” His eyes never left his ghostly face in the window glass. “And I mean it, girl. Don’t lie.”

He could see her shape in the glass, too, pale and slight and desperately alone. She didn't speak at once, and when she did it was in a voice small and hard and brittle as ceramic. "I want to know, Mister Fabray. I want to know if Madame Vigran killed my sister. I want to know if I and the rest of my sisters are safe, and yes." She faltered then, but when she pressed forward, it was with a new sharpness, as though that brittle ceramic had shattered and would cut. "If she did it. I want her dead."

Simon lifted the vodka to his lips again and drank. "I can't help you." A small, strangled sound escaped the girl behind him. He half-turned, looking back over his shoulder. "I'm not a killer. I told you. You have the wrong man."

"I need your help," she said again, voice gone high with strain.

"You have the wrong man," he said again.

Her reflection snatched up her poncho and turned to go. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"Girl!" he called after her, conscious of the faint humming in his chest implant.

Eirene stopped.

"If you head up to 117th Street and go left almost to the rim wall, you'll find a Cid Arthurian temple. The monks will take you in. They might even be able to pay for your way off-station. They can keep you safe."

Eirene didn't move for just a second. Then she left without another word.

* * *

THE GREAT LAMPS that served for false suns on Hyadon were all dark by the time Simon hit the streets at last. Steam rose from vents in the street and drifted to mingle with the catwalks and the tubeways that stretched between

the towers of the great city—many of them piercing the roof of the world overhead and continuing up toward the empty center of the great ring.

The street rose ahead, the throng and silver serpents of the elevated tramline rising up the face of a mountain before him. Like so many of the great station-cities of the galaxy, Hyadon was built on a ring, a great hoop three miles in diameter and more than a mile wide. Simon wasn't sure how many people lived on the ring. It must have been millions, all of them crammed on top of one another, living in insulae, in apartments smaller than the scullery in his father's manor back home on Varadeto.

His offices were in one of the old industrial zones, just above one of the fisheries whose waters—choked with algae and lotus blossoms—helped support the city's atmosphere for the millions who called it home. Canals ran beneath the streets that circled the turning ring like the inlay on a globe. Hyadon had no formal state, no government as Simon understood it, only shareholders—though often it seemed the plutocrats of Hyadon had only reinvented lordship in their wretched and cutthroat way.

The streets glowed with advertisements, with holographs shimmering, products flashing and chasing would-be customers as they passed glass storefronts and eateries. One shop beside a bakery advertised cerebral implants, while another sold wholecloth memories—by appointment only. Simon could hardly leave his office—could hardly look out his window—without recalling how foreign he was, and how foreign all Hyadon was to him. Man was meant to live on the skin of a world beneath the open sky. He missed his father's estate on Varadeto, the olive groves and the mountains marching at the horizon beyond the pampas. The old house would have been his, in time.

If he'd but lived.

The Mandari noodle shop was wedged beneath an office tower that pierced the roof of the ring and continued out into space. Simon clattered down the steps to the basement level and into the smoky shop. The man

behind the counter grunted at him and bobbed his head, and Simon sagged into an open seat at the bar, and signaled in answer to the fellow's question that, yes, he'd take the usual. The server placed a clay teacup on the bar and went about his business.

Simon's business with the girl had left him with a foul taste in his mouth. It didn't sit right with him leaving her to twist as he had, but he could hardly throw himself against a grand dame of the Mandari clans on Hyadon. The Mandari owned half the ring.

But it wasn't right. There was nothing stopping this Vigran woman from just printing the parts she needed. That was how it was done in the Empire—for those injuries fresh organs could cure. The pressure of his implant against his arms crossed on the bar practically screamed at him. Keeping the girls around whole and healthy . . . it was an ugliness that made him wish the Empire would find Hyadon and burn it out of the sky. But the city was down on no Imperial charts. Like nearly all the Extrasolarian backspace holdings, its power and freedom depended on secrecy. It orbited no star, no world, but winged its black way through the blackest space far from the light of true civilization, a refuge for outcasts, derelicts, and freaks.

Like me. Simon sipped his tea.

Dinner came in time, noodles and poached fish grown on-station. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad, either. Simon ate in silence, called the server to refill his tea. On a holograph plate above the bar, images flashed, reporting the market closures for the Hyadon Exchange, and news had come in regarding the sale at auction of a sculpture—a single marble wing that once might have belonged to an angel of victory—that had reportedly come from Old Earth herself. The wing was to be displayed in the headquarters of Sen Biologics, one of the corporate interests who called Hyadon station home. Evidently the corp had purchased the antiquity for several million talents of platinum specie, a staggering price and a

blasphemy, for such artifacts of the Mother and the Golden Age of Man were beyond price in truth, but not among such barbarians.

“You want dessert?” the server asked, jolting Simon from his contemplation. The fellow peered at Simon with glassy, colorless eyes. He had lost the ones Mother Earth and Evolution had given him in a vacuum accident, Simon knew, and tried not to stare.

“Not today, Qiu,” the detective said, going for the credit chit he kept sealed in an inner pocket of his old white jacket. Some feminine blur of motion had caught his eye, commanded his attention as only women can command, and looking back at the holograph he saw a pale woman in white leap against starry blackness. As he watched, she turned a pirouette, her dress fanning like the arms of the galaxy as the camera twisted overhead. It was Eirene. Or was it? So like was she to her sisters that even Simon—who had just passed an hour with her—could not be certain.

In the end it didn’t matter. The camera cut and showed the homunculi all dancing together, as perfect in their motions as the mechanisms of a Durantine clock. Their lovely faces each were painted red as suns, their hair pinned back and chased with gold, and when the ad was done, the Mandari pictograms painted themselves white against the darkened screen.

Xinyi Vigran presents . . .

River of Stars.

Information for the ordering of tickets flashed for a moment and faded before Simon could look away, the moment come and gone.

* * *

IT HAD NOT BEEN difficult to find the opera house: the address had been in the advertisement, and a simple inquiry on his pocket terminal had produced the answer—and the same advertisement again. His chest ached about his implant as he rounded the street corner, peering up at the iron sky

where the spire of a high-rise rose above the curving, incoherent shape of the theater itself. It was an ugly building, without the graceful arches and fine pillars or stained glass and statuary one might find on such a building in the Empire. It was cold and white, its domes like waves of metal and glass beneath the tower that pierced the roof of the world.

He found the stage access via a loading dock. The dock was empty and the sounds of the city were hushed, the nearest noise that of the trams on the main street and of a solitary cargo van moving up the alley behind. Simon felt certain there were cameras. There were always cameras. On Hyadon, as in the Empire, no man was every truly alone, even in his own home. The daimon machines upon whose service the Extrasolarians depended—who controlled everything from lights to airlocks to temperature regulation—were always listening. And yet it was always possible, even easy, to force one's way into a place. All one needed was a spine, a smile, and—for the tricky spots—a terminal complete with a suite of cybersecurity tools of the sort you could find in such lawless climes as Hyadon station. On Hyadon, money—not blood—was king, and might was the only law.

“You there!” a rough voice called out. “Who are you? You shouldn't be in here.”

Simon halted in the white corridor just inside the loading dock. A man in charcoal body armor with a face like weathered stone moved toward him. That hadn't taken long. Simon recognized the white fist emblem on the man's arm as belonging to a sec firm of the very type he'd mentioned to Eirene earlier that evening.

The man who once had been a knight did his best to smile blandly. He did not lie easily, but he lied well. Decades of living on the station had forced him to learn. “Courier, sir. Private message for the lady.”

The man looked him over, eyes very narrow. “Courier, is it? Who is it sent you?”

“Can't say, sir,” Simon said, averting his eyes. “Private, as I say.”

“Well, let’s have it then.” The man extended a hand, gestured for Simon to hand it over.

“You misunderstand me,” he said, and tapped his forehead. “I have the message.” It was not uncommon—both on Hyadon and in the Empire—for the truly secret, the truly intimate messages sent between the great of the galaxy to be sent not via radio or quantum telegraph, but on paper or in the minds of the messenger. Such systems were less vulnerable to sabotage and interception, more secure.

Nonplussed by this, the man leaned back, eyes gone narrower still. “Who do you work for?”

“I told you,” Simon said, sensing his ruse was nearing its end. “I can’t say, but I’ve a message for Madame Vigran that won’t wait.” Even as the words tumbled from his mouth, Simon was not sure why he didn’t turn and leave. He might have done, and done so with relative ease, told the guardsman he’d be back with identification, forget the whole affair. Liquor was cheap, and sleep cheaper still. He owed Eirene and her dead sister nothing. They weren’t even human, not really.

And he was no knight.

The guard stepped back, lips drawn together. “No, I mean . . . what company you with? You’re a fighting man, that much is obvious.”

“Freelance,” Simon said brightly, and beginning to second guess his non-plan, he added, “I can come back tomorrow. Get verification.”

The guard shook his head, took his hand away from the shock-stick slotted into a holster on his thigh. “No need,” he said, raising a hand to his wrist comm. “I’ll call it in.” He turned his head to make the call, pressing fingers to the conduction patch behind his ear.

Simon didn’t hesitate. Turning from his hips, he slammed the heel of his hand down into the man’s temple with all the force and weight of his body. The overhanded blow caught the man completely by surprise, and he buckled as he struck the wall.

“Sorry,” the one-time knight said, though the guard could not hear him. Crouching, Simon checked his pulse. Still alive. That was good. He was only doing his job, and no man deserved to die for that. Not for the first time that night, Simon Fabray wondered what he was doing there—but then, he was no stranger to the question. He’d asked himself what he was doing when he took out Morrison’s gang for harassing the Sisters uptown, or when he’d saved that batch of embryos Captain Montero had stolen from the Natalists.

It just wasn’t right.

Nothing about Hyadon was *right*.

Perhaps that was all. He had come so far from home, to a half-life beyond the death that took his heart and whole world. He was a dead man, had been a long time, and so death had lost its sting. Better to die setting the world to rights—or a part of it, only—than to live on like some walking shadow. Far better. His second life had been a gift, and if all he did with it was find a way to give it back, maybe that was right. They were hard worlds, all of them, and broken. But a man needn’t be broken himself, not where it counted.

When Simon emerged from the utility closet where he left the unconscious guard, it was with the man’s terminal in his hand. He’d used the fellow’s thumbprint to unlock it, and kept it open by repeatedly tapping the display. He found the key for the stairs easily enough, and climbed up a level. With each passing moment he expected an alarm to sound, but it never did. It took finesse to be a criminal on a station like Hyadon, where there was a log for every door and every ventilator flap. It took far more to seek any sort of justice, for it was the criminals who ruled. And yet the theater and the annex attached to it—and that tower—were not the fortress of some genetics baron. The wealthy scion of a Mandari clan Xinyi Vigran might have been, but if she was one of the shareholders who ruled the ring city, she was not one of the great ones. Simon didn’t see another guard as he

plodded along the corridor, passing one-way mirrors that looked in on the flat, false-wood floor of a dance studio. He passed by the sealed bulkhead of a lavatory door opposite a side passage, and beyond that found a shuttered recreation room. The lights were down.

There was no performance in the theater proper that night—he'd made sure of that, checking the station's datasphere as he picked his way through the streets to reach it. The other girls were doubtless in their beds in what passed for a dormitory in that strange and silent place. The silhouettes of ballerinas showed in images hung on the walls, strangely sterile. Commercial art hung to convey a theme.

They felt almost oppressive, as though there were totems meant to impose their horizon on all who came to that hall. For the girls were to be only dancers, only dancers and . . . that other thing.

"Who are you?"

A familiar voice called from behind.

Simon turned, simultaneously trying to hide the guard's pilfered terminal and to reach for his sword hilt where it lay concealed in a pocket of his white coat.

Eirene stood in the mouth of the lavatory, the bulkhead swung open behind her. She wore a dancer's leotard, pale blue, though no paint altered the harsh line of jaw and cheekbone. A terminal in a band on her upper arm played wordless music softly in the still air. Had she been practicing alone?

"How did you get in here?"

The one-time knight did his best to smile and polished his earlier lie to answer her first question. "I'm a courier, miss. Come from Master Zeitelmann for your Madame."

The homunculus nodded only slowly, comprehending. She had heard of Arnulf Zeitelmann, and she should, for he owned a fifth of the ring. Of course he would have a message for the dancer's mistress, *she* was the

center of the girl's world, after all. "Madame's sick," she said. "We haven't seen her down here in weeks. Only Doctor Afonso sees her."

The illusion that she was Eirene broke as the girl tossed her head. The voice was the same—or nearly so—but there was a hauteur in this one unlike the nerves and timid shyness of the girl who'd come to his office earlier that evening. She was one of the others, another of Madame Vigran's clones. An idea struck Simon then, and he said, "My master found one of your sisters wandering the city."

The girl brightened at once. "Maria?"

Simon kept his composure. He was sure the girl Maria—what was left of her—was in the building. The fate of any such clone was no mystery on Hyadon, only a reality most were too squeamish or too polite to countenance. Let this girl think whatever she wanted, *he* wanted to see the woman in charge.

"I've said too much already," he said, sure he had her interest, "my master sent me to inquire if there was a bounty for her safe conduct. He would be only too happy to restore her to you all." Simon made a show of looking round the hall. "Would it be possible to see your mistress?" He circled back to an earlier question, and said, "The guards below said I was to be admitted."

The girl looked him over, and if the thought that the guard should have accompanied him upstairs crossed her mind, she did not voice it. "I told you," she said, at last silencing the soft music from her terminal, "no one's seen Madame in weeks. Only the doctor."

"That's just fine," Simon said, pocketing the guard's terminal as discreetly as he could. He would not need it. "Is he here? Can you take me to him?"

* * *

THE DOOR UNSEALED itself and rolled into a pocket in the wall as the girl—the image of Eirene and the murdered Maria, both—led Simon over the threshold into the annex above and behind the theater proper. He could hardly believe his luck. Of all the sorts of people he might have found wandering the halls below—security guards, custodial workers, lonely stagehands—he had happened upon one of those most able to assist his entry and most likely to believe his lie. Doubtless the girl cared for her sisters, and Simon had counted on that care to make her believe. On top of that, she was one of the Madame’s prized possessions, and though she was a kind of slave, her gilded cage offered its privileges, as all cages did.

Twice men in the charcoal of the guard he’d met below stopped them to inquire who Simon was, and twice the girl told his lie for him. “He’s from Master Zeitelmann, says he has a message for the Madame.”

Twice the guards waved them on.

She led Simon to a lift and up another three levels to a spot where the halls glowed a sanitary white. They stopped before another door, this one of heavy, mirrored glass. The girl keyed the comm panel—a black mirror itself to the right of the frame.

“Doctor Afonso?” she said.

An older man’s voice came across the comm after a few moments’ silence. “Rhea, is that you? I told you not to bother me after the dinner hour.

“No, doctor. It’s Phoebe.”

“Phoebe?” the older man. “What is it? You know I’m busy. Madame is unwell. She needs me.”

The dancer, Phoebe, bobbed her head apologetically and pressed her lips together before saying. “I know, sir, but there’s a man here. A courier from Lord Zeitelmann. He says he has news about Maria.”

“Maria?” the doctor’s voice rose sharply. Surprise? Confusion? If Simon had any doubts about the homunculi’s fate, that dispelled them. He felt a black knot forming in the pit of his stomach. “Well, send him in, girl.

Send him in.” In the instant before the doctor cut the comms, he could be heard to mutter. “News about Maria?”

The mirror depolarized, turning the door to glass as it slid aside.

The door closed again before Simon realized the girl Phoebe had not followed him. Another gleaming white hall greeted him, minutely tiled and shining beneath the tube lights overhead. A man emerged from the side door a moment later. Small, bald, black-eyed and dressed in slick gray-blues. Simon recognized the logo of Sen Biologics pinned to his lapel. He was far shorter than Simon was, and peered up at him owlshly. “You’ve an Imperial look about you,” he said without preamble.

“What?”

“The scars!” he wagged a finger at Simon’s face and neck. “They always leave the scars on those they uplift. They don’t have to. Empire just wants you marked. We can clean those up, you know?”

Simon took a step back. The man had come very close. “I don’t want them cleaned. I won them.”

“Ah! You are Imperial, then,” the doctor said, face gone grave. “Patrician? A knight? What’s a knight want with the Madame?”

Simon crossed his arms, bringing one hand inside his jacket and near the hilt of his sword. “The girls don’t know, do they?”

“Know what?” Afonso blinked, evidently surprised by this question.

“That they’re clones.”

“Oh, that!” the doctor shifted, hand in his pockets. “They know that!”

“Of *her*.”

Then it was Afonso’s turn to step back, tension stretching like a line between them, pulled taut and fit to sing. “They know that, too. The Madame was great in her day, a true artist, you understand. She is very old now, and her health . . . it is not so good as once it was.” He pursed his lips. “But you have news of Maria, I understand. Phoebe said you are from Zeitelmann? This is most irregular.”

“Not about Maria,” Simon said. “About Eirene.”

“Eirene?” surprised, Afonso took his hands from his pockets, where just before Simon was sure he’d held a weapon or the fob of some panic alarm. If Simon was right, the little man had probably killed Maria himself, carved her up for parts. He knew Zeitelmann would have no news of Maria, could have none. But the mention of the other clone had caught him off guard. Did he believe Simon could be trusted now? Did he believe himself safe. “What of Eirene?”

Simon pressed forward, using his advantage to push past the doctor through the side door whence the little man had come. “You knew she was missing?” Simon asked, certain the answer was yes. She could not have been allowed the freedom of the city.

“Gone this morning. We had men looking for her.” Afonso followed Simon into the room.

The laboratory was immaculate, clean as clean and whiter—if such a thing were possible—than the hall itself. Terminal displays shone in an arc along one wall above a desk where a clay tea service stood beside a small, carefully pruned tree. Shears lay to one side, and a neat pile of trimmings lay with it. But Simon glanced at these for only a passing instant. His eyes were drawn to the sample that lay under glass on the operating table, a suite of mechanical arms hovering about it, momentarily lifeless and oddly baroque, like the painting of some terrible battle, an instant frozen in time.

He didn’t need to be told it was human tissue. Some part of him just knew. But he wasn’t sure at first exactly what he was looking at: the red flesh, white beneath; two flat lobes laid open and yellowing, gray with corruption. Then he turned his head and understood. They were lungs. Each had been butterflied and folded open to reveal the alveoli. Simon was no physician, but he knew enough of butchery to know there was something very wrong with them.

“Am I to assume that your people found her?”

“She’s safe,” Simon said, hoping that the girl had kept running, had found the Cid Arthurian monastery he’d tried—half-heartedly—to steer her toward. He should have gone with her, should have seen her to safety, done the thing right. He shifted his position, cocked his head down at the lungs splayed and clamped open on the slab before him. They must have belonged to the Madame, he reasoned, and looked round as if expecting to find evidence of the murdered girl discarded in one corner, cast aside like the crumpled pages of a failed manuscript, a story cut short before its end.

“How much does Zeitelmann want for her?” the doctor asked. “It can’t be much. He must know the Madame has others, and more on the way. If he’s not willing to go low on price, he can keep the girl.”

A solitary hiss of cold laughter escaped by Simon’s nose. “Others.” He gripped the sword hilt hidden in the lining of his jacket. Simon didn’t believe the doctor for a moment. Clones such as Eirene were not cheap, nor was it cheap to raise and to maintain them—and what was more, the girl was not only a clone, but a fixture in the Madame’s ballet. She was too valuable to simply cast aside, and it was that callousness—the willingness to barter with her life, to pretend she held no value to them—that set his teeth on edge.

It’s all wrong, he thought. All wrong.

And jerking his chin at the organs on display, Simon said, “What’s wrong with her? Your Madame?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” said Doctor Afonso. “Patient confidentiality, you understand. My contract with the Madame forbids me to discuss her medical condition.”

“But they are donors?” Simon asked. He wanted to be sure. “The dancers?” Every second the doctor did not answer, Simon could feel his patience burning away, sloughing off until only a lump of fury black as charcoal remained in the little furnace that had replaced his heart. He knew the girl who’d come to ask for his help was not truly human, but he couldn’t

make himself care. She was a girl in trouble, and whatever else may be, that trouble was real. What did it matter who was human, if the inhuman suffered the same? Was it not the pain that mattered?

He couldn't remember drawing his sword, couldn't remember squeezing the triggers that conjured the liquid metal blade. All he remembered was the hum and rippling shine of it, blue-white as crystal, as he slammed the blade down through the medical glass and through the lungs and the slab beneath them. The highmatter of that sword cut clean as a hot wire through wax, sliced glass and brushed metal and the steel of one robotic arm as if none of it were even there. Afonso yelped and leaped back.

His demonstration done, Simon lurched forward and seized the little man by his lapel, forcing him back against the wall. The man was sure to have neural implants, would be able to signal for help as soon as he remembered that he could, and how. Anticipating this, Simon raised the edge of his antique weapon to the man's chin and held it there. "Call for help, and you're done."

"You're not from Zeitelmann!" The doctor grunted, voice choked as Simon leaned his weight against him. Despite this, a cavalcade of questions came bubbling forth, each barely more than a whisper as Afonso stretched away from Simon's blade. "Who are you? How did you get in here? Who let you in?"

"They *are* all donors, aren't they?" Simon asked. He didn't need the answer. "The girls?"

"What?" Afonso asked, and yelped when Simon jostled him. "Yes! Yes, of course they are! Madame Vigran is over five hundred years old! Even with the best gene tonics on the market, she needs a full refit every few years to prevent total collapse!"

Not releasing the doctor, Simon drew back half a step. He'd known the truth, known it from the minute Eirene walked into his office, and still the moment of confirmation was a shock. He was not at home, not in the galaxy

he knew: the galaxy of light; of planets and plain order. Of decency. Of law. He was on Hyadon, in the Dark between the stars, and Hyadon was the gutter—one of the gutters—into which any who could not live in that light was inevitably drained. He was one such bit of refuse, one such refugee. But he did not have to live as they lived, where money was power and power was law. He was no libertine. Despite his circumstances, despite his wounds, down in the foundations of his soul—in his very bones—he was a knight of the Sollan Empire. Even still.

“So Maria is dead?” Simon asked.

“She served her purpose!” the doctor answered, voice defensive, as if this were any justification for murder, for butchery and the horrible vampirism it served.

It took every ounce of willpower Simon possessed not to strike the man down where he stood. “Her *purpose*?” he snarled through clenched teeth. “Her *purpose*!”

“That was why she was made!” Afonso said. “She would not have lived at all were it not for us! We’ve maintained the Madame’s contract for decades! *Decades*! It’s just the way things are done!”

The very earth reeled about him—which he supposed it did—and Simon released Doctor Afonso, shaking his head as if to clear it of some oppression. Belatedly then, he realized the doctor had soaked the front of his trousers from terror. Before the man could reconsider his circumstances and signal for aid, Simon raised his sword, aimed the point square at the evil fellow’s chest. “Take me to her.”

* * *

GONE WAS the sterile whiteness of the medical annex with its minute, polished tiles and the frigid crispness of the air. The lift—when Afonso

opened it, walking gingerly in light of his wet pants—was richly paneled in brass and red velvet.

“Penthouse suite,” Afonso stammered, beady eyes wide as they would go as they followed the emitter end of Simon’s hilt like those of a child skirting round a standing cobra.

The lift began to move, ascending smoothly along what Simon guessed was the tower he’d seen rising above the lower theater building. As they went, he felt his weight begin to lessen. Hyadon station spun to simulate the effects of gravity, but that gravity was normed at street level, so that a pound of gold weighed one pound in the hand. But the higher one climbed above the streets, the less and less that false gravity weighed upon the bones, so that the same gold piece might float were it placed at or near the center. Towering then above the street level, the great libertines who ruled Hyadon drifted about their palaces on light feet, feeling neither the weight of their bodies nor their actions.

The door chimed and slid open.

Simon pressed the doctor forward with the hilt of his sword. Afonso staggered ahead of him onto wine dark Tavrosi carpets. Red-stained wood panels marked the lower walls, and richly frescoed plaster hid the metal superstructure of the station itself, softening the mechanical world to something that recalled almost the estate of some great Imperial lord. A tall vase—white and blue porcelain—stood on a plinth under glass ahead.

“Lead the way,” Simon said, and prodded the physician.

Afonso crossed the atrium to the open double doors. The sitting room beyond was as richly appointed. Frescoed walls showed a water garden filled with flowers and jewel-bright birds. A holography well sat sunk into the floor, couches circling about it, but the projector was dark, and the grand piano opposite stood closed and dusty from long neglect.

A short hall passed another room and the closed bulkhead of a private lavatory, and beyond . . .

Simon heard the *beep* of medical instruments before they crossed the threshold, smelled the bite of antiseptic and the underlying of rot of disease. And there she was.

Everything the girl who'd come to his office that evening was, Xinyi Vigran was no longer. Slim as Eirene was, the woman that lay abed beneath coverlets of checkered black and white could not have weighed less than six hundred pounds at street level. It was no wonder she chose to dwell above, where the slower turning of Hyadon's great wheel would ease the torment of her bones. If Eirene's hair had been thick and dark and smoother than oil, what little remained of the Madame's was white and brittle as chalk, leaving huge stripes of her pockmarked scalp bare and blotched. Her skin was not of porcelain to match the Earth-ware vase on display in her atrium, but so dry and stretched and wrinkled that the centuries could be read on her like the mountains and rivers of some ancient map.

Afonso bowed his head. "Madame, you have a visitor."

The old leviathan did not stir.

"Is she dead?" Simon asked. But no, she could not be. White medical equipment half-circled the antique carved wooden bedstead, as out of place as Simon felt. These chimed softly, and a holograph displayed her vitals in violent green. Beside her head, a silver staff rose, hooked to the ceiling, and from it a blood bag swayed like a lonely red fruit upon a tree of steel.

Still bowing his head, Afonso shuffled forward, voice quavering, "Madame, there is a knight to see you."

Madame Vigran opened one fat-enfolded eye. It was the same bright amber as Eirene's, though the orb seemed shrunken in that flat expanse she called a face. "A knight?" She stared at Simon blearily, not really seeing. "He is not from Vorgossos then? It is not my time?"

"There is no word from Vorgossos, ma'am," the doctor said. "We are trying."

"Vorgossos?" Simon frowned. He'd never heard the name.

Afonso answered. "She does not have long. More serious interventions are needed to sustain her. We don't have the means. She but asks if you're from those who do." He raised his voice, "No, ma'am. He's here about Eirene."

"Eirene?" Madame Vigran's second eye opened. "You found her?" Those familiar eyes flickered to Afonso. "A bounty hunter?"

"Not exactly," Simon said. He could not tell how present the old woman was. There was a haziness in her eyes and a distance in her tone that made him wonder. But it was her will that had set this foul system in motion, whether or not she was in any state to captain her way, she had set the course. "Eirene is safe. You're not to harm her. Not to look for her. She's not yours anymore."

One jewel-taloned finger found a control, and her bed tilted upward very, very slowly. "Not *mine*?" Vigran echoed. "She's *me*. Would you rob an old woman of her support?"

"She's not a crutch," Simon said. "None of them are, but I haven't come to save them." The words and his intentions only crystallized for Simon as he spoke them. It was the only real option. He might barter for the one girl's life, but he could not stop the cycle that so enslaved the others, not and live himself. "She knows what you are, anyway. She knows you killed Maria, and why. You can't bring her back without poisoning the well. She'll tell the others. She's no good to you."

"Her parts are good to me," Vigran replied without hesitation. "I can have Afonso here put her on ice until I need her." Her words were coming clearer with every syllable, though her eyes had yet to find their focus. "Unless you've some better offer, *knight*."

Something whined as her bed stabilized her in a seated position, and it was only then that Simon saw the silvery tube shunted through the front of her throat. Some machine breathed for her, and Simon recalled the lungs

pinned on the display in Afonso's lab below. He followed the tube with his eyes, found the ventilator among the equipment at her bedside.

"These machines are keeping you alive," Simon said, lamely. "Why bother with the girls?"

Afonso stammered a response before his mistress had a chance. "Organ replacement is better," he said. "The nubile tissue has rejuvenating effects on the body as a whole. Young organs, young blood, encourages new development in older systems. Helps to lengthen overall life expectancy beyond what the machines can offer."

The former knight felt himself recoil. The indecency, the ghoulish disregard for life—even the lives of homunculi, who in the Empire were slaves and little more—twisted his guts. With his free hand, he touched his implant through the front of his shirt. "You can't go back," he said simply. "No matter how many of them you kill, you can't be what you were."

"I can," she said. "Vorgossos will hear me. They can sell me a new body. A new brain. Everything."

"Only they can," Afonso said. The man was shaking and had edged as far from Simon as he could manage, though he was still within reach of the flash of the blade.

"And you've had no word," Simon said, eyes sweeping over the machines that kept the vampire alive. "How many have you killed? For this?"

Neither answered.

"You don't even know," Simon realized, looking from one to the other.

The fog that sheened the old woman's eyes had lifted somewhat, and they narrowed as she asked, "Who are you? How did you get in here? Afonso, explain yourself!"

"You don't even know?" Simon could hardly find his breath. He had to steady himself against the arc of monitors to keep himself from falling in the reduced gravity of the suite. "You really have no idea?"

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “They’re *my* bodies, and *mine* to do with as I please. Can you honestly say you would do any differently, had you the means?”

Simon didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” he said, and tore at the buttons of his blue shirt to flash the silver of his implant. “I’d rather be dead than live like you.”

“You will be,” Vigran agreed. “Dead.”

Afonso’s eyes went wide, and he stood straighter. “No Madame! No! He’s armed!” Simon was sure the doctor had a neural lace implanted in his brain, was equally sure that he’d heard with some sense other than hearing his mistress sound the alarm that Simon had threatened the doctor from ringing.

The next instant proved him right.

A siren wailed high and thin and terrible through the plastered metal walls.

“I don’t know who you think you are, *sir*,” the old woman said, using the Imperial honorific like a slur. “But you dare come here, to my house! And threaten me? Where is Eirene? Tell me, and I may permit you to walk out of here with your skin!”

Simon grimaced, tried to stand straight beneath the onslaught of the siren. His mind conjured images of the gray armored guard rushing up stairs, crowding into the lift. He had but seconds. If he did not act, then and there, it all would be for nothing. If Vigran was right—if he was to die—he would die setting some small piece of the world to rights. He hoped Eirene had found the monks, hoped at least she might escape her lot, and the others, too. But if he hoped to live at all, there was but one thing he could do, just as Vigran had done all her evil life.

He raised his sword, blade flashing back into existence like the sun coming from behind a cloud. Afonso yelped and fell against the side of the bed in his haste to get away. But Simon did not kill him. He might have

done, but Hyadon and the other stations like it were so full of men like him that his death would never change the balance. He was a tool, an appendage of the behemoth in the checkered bed—and of all like her.

He slashed the ventilator instead, the liquid metal of his blade shearing through the braided silver tube and squat tower whence it ran. Vigran's eyes went wide, and somehow despite the siren Simon heard her gasp and wheeze. One brightly taloned hand went to her neck, her arm flapping sheetlike in her panic.

She would be dead in seconds, and there was nothing her doctor could do.

Simon's eyes raked over the tableau. One last look, one last instant. He needed to move. His eyes lighted on the blood bag hanging from the staff, red as the other monitors were turning. Maria's blood, he was certain. He vanished his blade and fled toward the door. If he could make the lift, he decided—if he could make the lift, that would be far enough.

* * *

THE WEIGHT of the ring-world pressed on him as Simon rode the lift down. He had no shield, no way to defend himself should the guards open fire. He knew he'd reached the end. He knew Madame Vigran was dead, but that was cold comfort as he leaned against the panel that controlled the lift. He'd be in the lobby in seconds.

Was it worth it?

He wasn't sure. He hadn't wanted to help the girl at all, and yet he found he could not ignore her and remain himself—and it was better to die himself than live on as someone else, something else. Like the Madame.

And yet like the Madame he had killed to save himself. He had a desperate and perhaps vain hope that by killing their employer, he had stripped her guards of any incentive to do him harm. They were not bound

to her by any oath of loyalty, they were obedient out of devotion to her person or station. With Vigran dead, there was no one to pay them. It might not matter. The guards might not know she was dead, and even if they did, one might kill him for having terminated their contract along with their client. They might kill him because they could.

But no.

Simon stood straight, the weight of Hyadon fully on his shoulders once again. With Vigran gone, there would be no hounds for Eirene, no huntsman to carve away her heart. And the others might live. Phoebe and the rest. Perhaps they could run the theater themselves, or find a new one of their own. More likely, they would find themselves homeless, desperate and alone. But their lives would be their own, and maybe that was enough. Maybe *any* life was better than none.

He hoped so.

The lift slid to a halt. The door opened.

Simon stepped out like man emerging onto a stage, his hands in the air and empty. Seeing two of the gray-clad guards advancing, disruptors raised, he lifted up his voice and cried out, “She’s dead!”

DAUGHTER OF SWORDS

* * *

CASSANDRA MARLOWE WAS BORN IN EXILE, HER FATHER ALONE, HER MOTHER dead. It was thanks to the genetic wizardry of the Jaddian princes that she was born at all, conceived by Hadrian Marlowe's contributions and a preserved drop of Valka Onderra's blood. The Planet of Fire is all she had ever known. The life of a student of the Swordmasters. It is a hard life, a trying life—the sole foreigner amidst so many of the children of the Jaddian nobility. The days are long, the training difficult. She did not ask to be born. But then again, who does?

– *Originally published in this volume.*

* * *

“GET UP!”

Four students there were in the *Paradi du Alkarshae*, beneath the cherry blossoms. All but one of them was sprawling, groaning on the worn marble. The one still on her feet *clacked* her twin swords together, sending a noise

like the cracking of bone echoing through the walled garden, playing off the relief images of Prince Katanes the Great imparting his knowledge of the sword.

“I said get up!” the girl half-yelled, turning where she stood to mark her assailants in turn.

But Amuhia di Sanaan did not rise, only curled around her bruised belly. Piedad lay on her back, hand still clutching her own sword. Only Naziha was kneeling, had nearly managed to find her feet. “You’ll . . . pay . . . for this,” she said. “The masters . . . my father . . .”

Cassandra thrust her right-hand sword in the other girl’s direction, her own chest still heaving from the scuffle. “Get up, Naziha,” she said.

“*Tua . . . puttana!*” the other girl said, clenching her teeth.

“Puttana?” Cassandra echoed the other girl in her native Jaddian. “I’m not the one who started this, Naziha! That was *you*.”

Naziha di Mortana lurched unsteadily to her feet. “You offworld bitch!” She lunged.

Cassandra parried with the blade in her left hand, pivoted to bring the sword in her right around to strike the other girl in the back of the head. She felt the blow connect. Overmastered, Naziha fell, but managed to turn her tumble into a roll that brought her unsteadily back to her feet. That in itself ought not to have surprised the offworlder—Naziha was Swordmaster-trained, just as she—but Naziha had taken the worst of the beating. There was a black wheal already encircling her left eye, and a weeping mark on her left arm. The fight—the *attack*—had been Amuhia’s idea, but Amuhia had gone down first, and had not risen.

Father always said it was the loudest who were the quickest to fall . . .

The other girl struck at Cassandra’s face, but she turned the blow aside, slashed at Naziha’s shoulder. The Jaddian novice parried her, knocking Cassandra’s one blade wide. Only a desperate snap of the left elbow saved Cassandra from being clouted in her ear. She kicked the Jaddian girl in the

side of one knee. Naziha fell backwards, struck the marble with her flat ass. Cassandra pressed her advantage, planting a foot on the other girl's sword arm. With a smooth gesture, she laid the edge of one training sword against the side of Naziha's jaw. "Apologize."

"I'm sorry," Naziha said through still-clenched teeth, "the truth hurts."

Cassandra spurred the other girl in the ribs with her heel.

Naziha yelped.

"I said *apologize*."

"*Phanca tua!*"

Cassandra kicked her again.

A hand seized her from behind, closed not on her shoulder or her arm, but on one of the twin braids of ink-black hair that ran along her scalp. The tug torqued Cassandra's neck, and she yelped—and felt a sharp pang of embarrassment at the pathetic sound. Twisting round she found Pieda clutching the end of her braid, her bright eyes shining in her olive face.

But she had no sword.

Cassandra smacked her wrist with her own blade, felt the *crack* of vinyl on bone.

Pieda yelped herself, released Cassandra's braid.

Amuhia di Sanaan was sitting up, still clutching her belly. "You *freak*," she said. "Why did they breed you *eali* strong? You are no Jaddian!"

"I never said I was," Cassandra said, eyes darting from one girl to the next. She backed away, toward the fountain on the wall, water streaming from the mouth of the gorgon done in relief upon it. A wind played through the cherry blossoms, filling the air with fallen petals. "I never said I wanted to be."

"You don't belong here, *emondine!*" said Naziha, whose father was Prince of Mortana, one of the *Domagavani* whose council ruled the Principalities of Jadd.

Emondine.

The word was like a slap. A curse.

Offworlder. Foreigner.

Inferior being.

As if she needed any reminding of what she was. As if she did not know. As if it was not obvious. Anyone could tell at a glance that she was no Jaddian.

“Pig!” Piedad said. “Did you hear her squeal?”

“You’re one to talk, Pia,” said Amuhia, standing at last. “She got you good there.”

“Sh-shut up!” said Piedad, rubbing her wrist. Redirecting her ire and embarrassment back on Cassandra, she said, “It’s a miracle you don’t burn pink in the sun, you pig, you! You look like a ghost!”

Cassandra would have given anything for wings in that moment, given anything to be anywhere else. In her room looking down on the canal. In the manse down by the sea, with father and Neema . . . and . . .

. . . and the woman who was not her mother.

Anywhere else.

It was her blood. Always her blood.

She did not *look* Jaddian, and therefore was no Jaddian. Never mind that she had been born there. Never mind that Jaddian was her first tongue, that the Fire School was her first memory, that the holy planet was the only world she had ever known.

Her father was Sollan. Her mother a corpse.

Blood was all that mattered.

And her blood was the wrong sort.

Though the black of her hair would not have been out of place on the heads of any of the Jaddian royal class, her skin was her father’s ghost-pale, white as the marble that paved the *Paradi* and comprised its high, relief-carved walls. A proper, high-caste Jaddian *eali* had skin like polished bronze. It did not matter that father was one of the Peerage, a high lord of

the Sollan Empire, kin to the great Emperor himself. The Emperor was not Jaddian, and Jaddians were simply *superior*.

It did not matter that she had been born from the same tanks, bred by the same doctors that had bred them, her genes woven on the same looms. She was poor cloth by comparison.

Which of course explained why she was the only one without a mark on her.

Cassandra had backed herself up against the fountain, put the other three girls all before her. Both Amuhia and Naziha raised their training swords, and Pieda—crouching—retrieved her own.

“What do you want from me?” Cassandra asked the older girls, readying the two swords in her hands. They had set upon her while she was drilling in the *Paradi* alone. It was Aiwisruthrem, the watch between sundown and midnight, and the stars and two of Jadd’s three moons peered down over the garden wall. The training dummy lay fallen on the stones where the fight had started, away from the fountain in the middle of the yard, by the spot where the bole of the greatest cherry tree had upheaved the marble pavers. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you don’t belong here,” said Amuhia, who was eldest of the three, and nearly twenty standard. “You should be with your own kind.”

Her own kind...

Just who was that? She had no people, no one but her father—and her father was an exile, despised by his own people.

He’s a traitor, you know, Pieda had said, circling round to her left. *Your father.*

Naziha had agreed. *Tried to kill his own Emperor, they say . . .*

It wasn’t true. Cassandra had told them it wasn’t true. Her father wasn’t a traitor. His Emperor had betrayed him, had threatened to lock him up on Belusha, and for what? Because her father had struck the Emperor?

Because the Emperor had mocked her father in his grief? Because her mother . . . her mother . . .

Her mother was a witch, Piedad had said. *That's why she's so ugly.*

Cassandra had only ever seen pictures of her mother. The Lady Valka had died years before Cassandra was born. Decades before. There were pictures of her all over the manse. The whole place was decorated with father's drawings. Charcoals, inks, pastels, paintings. There was a picture of them together behind father's desk in his tower study: her and father and her mother. People said she looked more like her father—she had his coloring, his skin like ivory, his ebon hair—but it wasn't so. It was from her mother that Cassandra received her high cheekbones and the almond shape of her eyes.

Her mother had been beautiful. But maybe that was only how Father remembered her. How he had to remember her.

She doesn't have a mother! Amuhia had said.

She doesn't have a mother . . .

Cassandra knew she couldn't run. The other girls were between her and the arched exit from the garden, and the *Paradi du Alkarshae* had only the one. She might have climbed the wall. It was possible to leap from the fountain to the top of the gorgon's head and so reach the top of the wall—she had done it before, with Arman, when the two of them would sneak away to kiss where the School's cameras could not find them, but to do so would mean throwing down her swords, and if Amuhia and her brood caught her before she could make the parapet . . . she didn't like to think what might happen.

It was not an easy life, being a student of the Fire School. The training was hard, and it was not uncommon to learn that one of the novices had thrown herself into the Grand Canal and let the fires of Hephaistos consume her, or that the boys had ganged up on one of their own in the baths. The masters put a stop to all they could, but they were not omniscient, and the

trials were hard. It was a thing difficult to reconcile with the immense beauty of the place: of the marble colonnades and piazzas of *Il Casa du Burkan*, the Volcano House, white on the black slopes of the mountain above the lapis sea; the date palms waving in the golden sun; the coast alive at night with the blue glow of noctilucent algae where it washed against beaches of black volcanic sand.

But that was Jadd: velvet over steel, iron under silk, snarling faces hid beneath masks of enameled porcelain. It was a place where beauty was celebrated, and goodness, and truth. But there was ugliness hid just beneath the surface, and hardness. Jadd was a place where weakness was hammered down, beaten out.

And Cassandra's *otherness* was *weakness*, a weakness the other girls could smell.

She had no tribe but her father and poor Neema, no friends but Arman du Karaj. Arman, who loved her, who had promised to ask Father for her hand when they graduated, never mind that that was years and years away.

"You take her left, Pieda!" Amuhia said. "Naziha, the right!"

The three girls moved at once, Pieda striking high, Naziha thrusting at her ribs. Cassandra parried the thrust, stepped in to catch Pieda's sword with her left. It was not easy fighting two opponents at once, much less three. Amuhia di Sanaan hung back, circling her lackies.

She wants in behind me, Cassandra knew. Amuhia was a wolf, wanted to strike at her back. *She wants me away from the wall*.

Cassandra checked her footing, felt her heel contact the base of the fountain even as she parried another blow from Pieda. From the way the girl was favoring her non-dominant hand, Cassandra felt certain she'd done damage with her earlier blow. She was the weakest, then. Twisting, Cassandra delivered a kick to Naziha's belly, turned both her blades on Pieda. The other girl scrambled to parry, retreated a step. Cassandra lunged, the point of her sword punching into the other girl's shoulder. Had her blade

been highmatter, or even dead steel, the thrust would have been fatal. As matters stood, the blade was vinyl and foam over a steel core. It was heavier than a true sword—training weapons always were—but blunt and soft enough that Cassandra’s blow did no real harm. To hurt someone with the training sword—to really hurt them—required the edge, required force and leverage. Recovering forward, Cassandra brought her second sword down from on high, clubbing Pieda in the junction of shoulder and neck. The girl grunted, staggered even as Naziha recovered, howling as she slashed at Cassandra almost from behind. The pale girl ducked Naziha’s wild slash, turning both her weapons on Naziha in the little space afforded her by the blow she’d struck against Pieda.

The other girl’s grip was weak, and Cassandra battered through her guard, walloping her in the arm once, twice—both blows to leave fat bruises.

They called Father *Al Neroblis*, the Black Devil. They said he had the devil in him. A black fury that had turned him against his Emperor. For most of her fifteen years, Cassandra had not believed it, could not square the stories the other children told about him—about Hadrian Marlowe, the Black Devil of the Imperium—with the rough man who smiled every time he saw her, who had brushed her tears away whenever she came crying to him in his study, or on the deep porch behind the manse overlooking the sea.

But she *had* seen it, only once. Only briefly.

Once, sparring with Master Hydarnes for the amusement of the novices, the master’s blade had caught Father across the jaw. Father was an able fighter, one of the best in all the Imperium, but Master Hydarnes was a Maeskolos of the First Circle. *The* Maeskolos, according to some. And Father was not a young man. He was nearly six hundred standard years old, Cassandra knew, although not even Father—she thought—knew the proper figure. He had, for a time, been prisoner to the inhuman Cielcin. To the

Scourge of Earth itself, Syriani Dorayaica. Arman had told her, and Neema had confirmed it. Neema, who had been Father's servant since before the last of the Dragonslayers had died. The marks of that imprisonment still shone on Father's flesh. There were scars of his face from the Prophet's own talons, and his shoulder often burned where a Durantine surgeon had repaired it decades before. That weakness had permitted Hydarnes an opening, and the Swordmaster had taken that opening to strike Father with his blade across the mouth.

The great lords of Jadd wore masks at court to hide their faces. Not to conceal their identities—every one of the princes was known to every other—but to separate each man from his office. Still, each mask concealed the wearer's face.

In that moment, for only a moment, Father's mask had slipped.

Not a mask of jointed porcelain, such as High Prince Aldia wore. Father wore no ordinary mask. He was not of Jadd, nor so great a lord as to merit one even if he were. The mask he wore could not be seen, though every time he smiled, Cassandra thought she could see the straps of it hidden in his hair.

For just a moment, Father had forgotten to fix that smile back in place. That crooked smile, the one that always looked like it was on the verge of sliding off his face. It had fallen off then, revealing a frozen fury in Father's eyes. Cassandra hoped never to see there again. He had exploded at Hydarnes then, unleashed a flurry of blows that sent *the* Maeskolos's sword flying into the pond to float among the azure nenuphars.

Cassandra had seen the real him in that moment. Her real father. The one they called *Mad Marlowe*, and *Al Brutan*, the brute.

The Black Devil himself.

Cassandra had a bit of that devil in her too.

A sword in either hand, she hammered on Naziha, striking the girl's weakly guarded sword-arm, her shoulder, the side of her head. Something

struck Cassandra in the head, and she stumbled, fell against the rim of the fountain.

Amuhia had struck her, had circled round enough, coming between the reeling Pieda and Cassandra herself.

“You think you’re better than us!” she hissed, raising her sword. “You! An *emondine*!”

Cassandra had lost her right-hand sword in the wake of Amuhia’s assault. It had fallen on the ground at her feet. Still, she had the presence of mind to catch the other girl’s wrist as she brought her weapon down, wielding it like a club. In answer, Cassandra raised her own remaining sword . . . and smashed Amuhia di Sanaan in the mouth with her pommel, baring her own in a rictus like the face Father had made when he bested Master Hydarnes in the Court of Swans. Amuhia stumbled back, clutching her busted mouth with one hand.

Dark eyes brimmed with tears.

The wet crunch of broken teeth.

Petals fell like snow.

Pieda and Naziha both froze, horrified. The casual violence of childhood had ended, had become something *more real*, something terrible. Amuhia di Sanaan spat teeth on the marble between them, tears welling in her black Jaddian eyes. Seeing this, Pieda drew back, dropping her sword, hand going to her injured wrist, pain recognizing pain. Cassandra, defiant, moved her bloody-pommeled sword from left hand to right, drew the blade back as if to strike once more. Amuhia crumpled, went to her knees before Cassandra.

“You *whore*!” Naziha yelled, drawing back herself, “You broke her face!”

Terror at what she’d done gripped Cassandra, terror of the masters, of Father’s displeasure, of Amuhia’s father, the Lord Satrap of Sanaan. But she did not drop her sword, did not dare. Pieda was done and Amuhia

neutralized, but there was black fire in Naziha's eyes, and it had not been quenched.

"What is the meaning of all this?" said a clear, masculine voice, sharp as highmatter.

Cassandra let her sword fall to her side, brought her heels together as was expected of her—and of his station.

Grand Master Hydarnes ban Arshama du Novarra stood in the arched entrance to the *Paradi du Alkarshae*, his black robes and the wide, white sleeve of his *mandyas*—the ceremonial half-robe of the order that covered his left arm and side—flapping in the night breeze.

For a moment, only those robes—those robes and the boughs of the cherry trees—moved.

One by one, the other girls fell in line, faced the master with heels together and eyes forward. Piedad still clutched her wrist, Amuhia her mouth.

Naziha spoke. "The *emondine* attacked us, *domi*!" she said, "She broke Amuhia's teeth!"

"This isn't true!" Cassandra said, realizing too late that she'd responded to the first part of the other's girl's accusation, not the second.

Hydarnes du Novarra stepped into the *Paradi*, his slippered feet hardly making a sound. He moved with the careful, dancing grace of a Swordmaster, cock-footed, landing each step first with his heels. He was thin as a rapier blade, his darkly Jaddian features as sharply pointed. He wore a thin mustache and a pointed beard, black as his jaw-length hair. No one knew how old he was. As one of the Jaddian pureborn, the *eali al'aqran*, he might have been anywhere between two and eight hundred years standard. There were some who said he was older even than High Prince Aldia—who was very nearly a thousand, and confined to a float-chair—but Cassandra didn't believe it.

The master studied them all in turn, eyes moving from one face to the next. He looked at Amuhia last of all. “Take your hand away, girl,” he said.

Slowly, Amuhia complied. Red blood ran down her chin, tears down her face from eyes swollen with terror and pain.

“Show me,” Hydarnes said.

Amuhia opened her mouth. Cassandra had a brief glimpse of the red horror she had made, and felt a sense of mingled guilt and satisfaction, but said nothing. Amuhia had always been a pretty girl, the textbook *eali* goddess, with the lustrous Jaddian red-black hair, bronze skin, and full figure. Even Arman had expressed his admiration for her—Cassandra had hit him for that. It felt *good* to have marred that beauty, if only temporarily. The thought of Amuhia hiding her mouth behind her hand for months as the new teeth were made to grow in and straight amused Cassandra so much she almost laughed, and had to look down at her shoes.

The girl’s blood and broken teeth were there, scattered on the pale marble.

“Go to medica,” Hydarnes said. “The surgeon will have a look at you.”

“She hurt my wrist, too!” said Pieda, stepping forward, presenting the bruised appendage.

Hydarnes looked down his nose at Pieda for a full two-count of seconds before he answered, extending a hand to grasp the proffered wrist. Pieda did not wince as he took it in his fingers and said, “Bend your wrist.”

She did.

“Only bruised, I think,” he said. “Take your friend and go.”

Cassandra felt a pang as they were dismissed without apparent punishment. She withdrew a step, felt the cold lip of the fountain press against the backs of both her thighs. Only Naziha remained, the most ardent of her accusers.

Hydarnes looked at her a long moment, then turned to Cassandra. “You attacked the three of them, Cassandra?”

She bowed her head, shook it. “No, Master. I defended myself.”

“Liar!” Naziha hissed, made a rude gesture with three fingers. “Master, you cannot believe this foreign whore! You saw what she did to Amuhia, she—”

Hydarnes raised a single finger, almost touching Naziha’s lips, all without taking his eyes from Cassandra’s face. “You defended yourself? From Amuhia’s teeth?”

Naziha smirked.

It wasn’t fair. They had attacked her!

Cassandra bridled. She knew Hydarnes would not respond to hysterics. What was it Father was always saying?

Rage is blindness, girl.

“Naziha asks that you believe I attacked the three of them—older girls, all—by myself. That I came here and attacked *them*. Alone.” She did not take her eyes from the master’s face during all her self-defense. “Why would I do that? Three-against-one? It is not a battle I could win.”

Hydarnes smiled. “It seems to me you were nearly victorious.”

Cassandra hung her head. She had not counted on her skill to so condemn her. She didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t fair. “I . . . ” she paused, “even if I had beaten them, Master, I could not win.” She looked him in the face. “I am losing now.”

Hydarnes smiled. He raised a bony finger, a finger that might have been more at home on the hand of a much older man. “Subtlety!” he said, “From the child of *Al Brutan*! Truly, the God works new miracles every day!” He looked sidelong at Naziha. “You say that you were training, you and the others?”

It was Naziha’s turn to study her feet. “Yes, Master.”

“With one mannequin?”

Naziha and Cassandra both turned to look at the fallen practice dummy. Cassandra’s heart leapt. Might the truth come out after all? Master

Hydarnes had not singled her out in the past, nor treated her unkindly.

“I—”

Hydarnes cut her off. “In your sleepwear?”

Naziha looked down at the shift she wore, the loose sirwal that sheathed her legs.

Cassandra, by contrast, wore the close-fitting whites of a Fire School neophyte, so like the robes of the fire-priests who tended the agiary temples above Volcano House, on the upper slopes of the Hephaistos.

“You are very brave to lie to me,” Hydarnes said to Naziha, sparing a glance for the cinder cone of restless Hephaistos where it rose above the walls of the *Paradi*. “Here of all places, beneath the God’s mountain.” He leaned forward then, brought his face to a level with Naziha’s. “Go to bed, child. I will speak with you and your compatriots in the morning. I want you to think about what you’re going to say, and whether or not what you say will be the truth.”

“I—” Naziha tried again.

“Go, child!” Still bent, Hydarnes pointed back behind him, through the arch that led back to the terrace gardens and the masters’ villas and the way back down to Volcano House.

She went, not attempting another word, leaving the signs of her violence in her wake. Four swords lay scattered on the ground with Amuhia’s teeth: three wielded by each of her assailants, and one of Cassandra’s own. The fighting mannequin lay on its side, toppled but otherwise undamaged.

When the noise of Naziha’s retreating feet was gone, Grand Master Hydarnes turned back to face Cassandra. “You are blessed, girl—do you know this?”

“Blessed?” Cassandra repeated the word.

“Your pagan countrymen might say *lucky*,” the master said. “Had Ahura Mazda—the all-knowing, the all-beneficent—seen fit to give you less skill with the blade, it would be your teeth on the ground, I am thinking, and not

the teeth of Amuhia di Sanaan.” He was silent then, looking round the *Paradi*. “Did they mean to kill you?”

Cassandra forgot to move, forgot even to breathe. She hadn’t considered that. The thought that Amuhia and the others might have wanted to do *more* than simply teach her a lesson had not entered her darkest dream.

“I don’t know,” Cassandra said at last.

“The others will . . . never accept you,” said Master Hydarnes, looking up into the boughs of the nearest cherry tree—the one whose bole had broken the marble pavers. “You are what you are, girl.”

“And what am I, master?” asked she.

“Your father’s daughter.” The flash of Hydarnes’s teeth in the starlight was like one of the moons emerging from behind a cloud. He twisted one end of his mustache. “He has been inviting trouble since the day he arrived. There are times I wonder why Prince Kaim and our Aldia felt him worth all this trouble, but I am not like ever to know.” He sighed. “I have not seen your father in some weeks.”

“He is in the manse, master,” she said. “He takes his walk up the mountain each day, but otherwise he keeps to his study. You know what he’s like.”

“I certainly do, child,” said Master Hydarnes. “Sometimes these spells of his last for years. Sometimes...decades. Still, do tell him my door is always open.”

“I will, master.”

Hydarnes inhaled, held his breath for a five-count of seconds. When he released it, he said, “Now, what am I to do with you?”

The girl looked up at her master. “With me?”

“This is not the first time you have had trouble with the other students,” he said. “It will not be the last.”

“They attacked me, master!” Cassandra protested, momentarily bereft. “Do you not believe me?”

Hydarnes waved her words away as though they were a cloud of gnats. “I need not believe anything, child,” he said. “I will have security review the footage of what transpired here. Should Amuhia and her fellow travelers be guilty of what you say, I will know of it, and they will be dealt with. But you broke the other girl’s teeth. You have not denied it, nor does the blood on your tunic.”

He pointed.

Cassandra looked down at her chest, for the first time noticing the spray of red against the white cotton.

“Why do you think we have you students wear white?” he asked, raising his finger until almost it was in line with her nose.

Feeling a flash of petulance, Cassandra looked down at her master’s uniform, at the white brocade of the half-robe that covered his left arm over the black robes beneath. “Why do you?”

Hydarnes chuckled. “We of the First Circle may wear whatever color we please. I wear white for the same reason you do: so that I cannot lie.”

“I thought it was to represent fire.”

“You are thinking of the priests,” he said, meaning the white priests of Ahura Mazda, not the black priests of Mother Earth worshipped by her father’s people, the ones who dwelt on the mountain. “But the thinking is related. White is the color of fire, and fire is purity—the *process* of purification. You students wear white that you might not deny your imperfections. I wear the white *mandyas* because I cannot afford to have any, eh?” He smiled, signifying by the flash of his teeth that he did not really believe himself perfected. “The white cloth keeps us humble,” he added, “keeps us honest.” He peered down into her face with dark eyes. “You did break the other girl’s teeth, did you not?”

She had not denied it, would not deny it now, but there was *more*. “I started the fight, master,” she said. “They came with swords. I was minding my own business. Training. But I struck first.” She had forgotten about the

cameras, she who should not forget, she who knew every shadowed corner, every blind spot where she and Arman might kiss unseen. If Master Hydarnes were to review the footage, he would see. “Maybe they only meant to scare me, but I struck first.”

“Ah.” Master Hydarnes had not taken his eyes from her while she spoke. Now he turned away, moved to the fallen target mannequin. Planting one foot on the lip of its base, he levered it upright, steadied it with a hand. “I see.” He was quiet a moment. “Why would you do that? Three-against-one?” They were her own words. It was her own question, tossed back at her. “I thought it was a battle you could not win.”

Cassandra felt black shame rising from her guts. She gripped her hands before herself, feeling at once very small and very young—the child who used to try and copy Father’s drawings with short pencils while he looked on with bemusement. “They brought swords...”

“To defeat the enemy without violence is the highest art,” Hydarnes said, having turned to study the relief carvings that showed Katanes the Great fighting seven men. Inscriptions in the flowing Jaddian captioned that image, words placed near the faces of Katanes and his companions to suggest a dialogue.

The pen is not mightier than the sword, as weak men claim, said the icon of the great prince, seeming to give the lie to Hydarnes’s words. *It is only another sword. So too is the tongue only another sword.*

But which sword shall we use? Asked the student clashing with the graven master.

Katanes answered, *To know is to be a true warrior.*

“I think Father would say that to defeat the enemy is the highest art,” Cassandra said.

Uncharacteristically, Hydarnes did not smile. “That is why he is *Al Brutan*, child,” he said, and there was a deep sorrow in the master she seldom saw there. “You know your family’s words?”

She nodded but did not speak.

The Sword, Our Orator.

“You spoke wisdom earlier,” Hydarnes said, “though perhaps only in desperation. This was a fight you could not win. As you said: You are losing now. You will be punished.”

“But they—!”

“Karani’s Chair!” Hydarnes said, raising a finger. “Now.”

Not arguing, Cassandra sank into the position, sitting in air as at an unseen chair, her arms thrust out parallel before her, palms out. She would be expected to hold that position until failure—however long it took.

“I cannot allow my students to brutalize one another,” Hydarnes said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, master.”

“Have you eaten this evening?”

“No, master.”

“After you fall, you will run a full circuit of the Grand Canal, all the way to the Atash Behram Jaddi and all the way down to the lagoon. When you have finished, you will seat yourself beneath the statue of Katanes in the White Square and tell anyone who asks what it is you have done until I release you.”

Cassandra clenched her jaw. She could hold Karani’s Chair for more than an hour starting from cold, but her legs had already begun to ache. It had been a long day of training . . . and would be longer still by the time it finally ended. A full circuit of the canal was nearly twenty miles. It would be morning by the time she finished it, and she would not be allowed to sleep until the next day was done.

And without supper.

The mere thought turned Cassandra’s stomach, if not nearly so much as the thought of being made to answer her fellow neophytes’ inquiries in the White Square. There were always those who made a point of asking

whenever a student was so punished. The practice was meant to humiliate the offender, but there was more to it than that. It was meant to quash rumor, to force the guilty to confess his or her offense voluntarily, to put an end to gossip.

Cassandra saw a glimmer of the master's wisdom, then. By forcing her to sit in the White Square, Cassandra's story would be heard first, and by the whole of the Fire School. Amuhia and her compatriots' account would be thus rendered rumor.

"May I eat before I go, master?" she asked, voice prematurely strained by the exercise.

"You may not," Hydarnes said.

"May I take water?" she asked.

"You may," the master said. To deny her that much would have been madness. "I will see you on the morrow, Cassandra, in White Square." He turned to go, halted. "I am going to leave you now, but I know your limits, and I will be reviewing the footage from this garden. If I decide you broke from Karani's Chair too early, I will have you start again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master," she said.

And then he was gone, vanished back through the archway whence he had come.

Cassandra's legs began to shake.

* * *

THE RED SUN of Jadd was rising over the Varkanan Sea by the time Cassandra reached the Shrine of the Atash Behram Jaddi halfway to the summit of Mount Hephaistos, more than six thousand cubits above sea level, at the mouth of the Grand Canal. The Shrine itself was a low, domed building of white stone, a quadrangular structure with four pillars and five

arches opening on each face, so that an open-air colonnade encircled the inner sanctum within. Cassandra had never been inside, had never seen the sacred fire—the Atash Behram Jaddi itself, the Eternal Fire whose embers, it was said, had been taken out of Earth in ancient days.

She was not one of the faithful, nor of the blood of Jadd, as Amuhia and her ilk were ever so quick to remind her.

Still, she lingered by the round pool before the temple steps, and staggered—panting—as she studied the Shrine’s white dome. The entire structure, like the buildings of the Fire School and Volcano House itself, was faced entirely in white marble that contrasted with the deep volcanic blacks of the mountain itself. Pausing to drink from her canteen, Cassandra leaned against the rail that overlooked the head of the Grand Canal. For there, directly below the Shrine of the Eternal Flame, stood the Gates of Fire, from whose open mouth spilled forth the ever-flowing magmas, the fires from the heart of Jadd itself. From that high vantage point, Cassandra could follow the line of the canal down the sloping mountain for miles to the sea so far below.

The ancient colonists who had settled the holy planet had disarmed the volcano, bored into its furnace heart, and carved the canal that Hephaistos might spill his ichor in the sea. The fashion of the Fire School was such that its buildings—white villas and low halls, gilt-domed towers and gardens and encircling walls—were built on terraces rising along the mountain, level after level on either side of the gleaming red line of the canal. Arched bridges crossed it, and there—at the lowest level, at the very entrance of the school near the stone pads where fliers and shuttlecraft might land at need—squatted Volcano House itself. *Il Casa du Burkan* in all its glory, straddling the canal itself.

From that highest of places, Cassandra could mark the path of her ascent, the *Scala Aspara*, as it ran past the lesser shrines and stone gardens that marked points on the pilgrim’s way to the Temple of the Eternal Fire.

And there, below the Fire School, below Volcano House, away to the left on the shores of the lagoon, was Father's house. The old manse had been a geological testing station when the colonists first came to Jadd, the very place where the diggers of the canal had dwelt in comfort. But that had been thousands of years before, and the place had been rebuilt and improved upon a dozen times by the various High Princes. It had for a time been the summer residence of certain of those princes, and though traces of its austere beginnings could be seen in the low, square shape of the building, in the half-forgotten instruments that clustered on its flat rooftops, it had become a grand and comfortable old house.

And it was the only home Cassandra Marlowe had ever known.

Spying the drum tower of his study, Cassandra wondered if Father was at work there even then, or if he had set out early that morning—as he often did when the fire priests sang to welcome the new day—to climb the mountain so far as he was willing. Did he know what had happened in the *Paradi du Alkarshae* the night before? Had Hydarnes told him, or sent a boy to tell him?

Knowing she should not linger long—even over such important questions as these—Cassandra began her long descent. She had climbed the mountain on the north side of the canal, which ran nearly due west from the mountain to the sea. She would descend along the south, moving clockwise, and with luck reach the waters of the lagoon below Volcano House just as her fellow neophytes were attending their first classes of the day. Breath coming hard, thighs burning, Cassandra bounced down a flight of marble steps, following the paved way past the swaying palms that thrived even at this altitude.

She reached the place where the pale, windowless fingers of the towers of the dead rose along the southern line of the *Scala Aspara*, nearly so wide as they were tall. There the bodies of the dead of the Fire School—and of those lords of Jadd who had earned the right to sky burial with the

Swordmasters—lay on stone beds beneath the open sky, there to be devoured by the ever-present birds.

Their raucous music filled the morning, and Cassandra passed them by, wondering—as she often did—if she might one day lie atop one of those pale fingers.

If she might ever obtain mastery.

Initiation even into the Ninth and lowest Circle of the Order of Swordmasters required decades of training. Would she be permitted to remain at the Fire School for so long? Father had dwelt in the house on the lagoon for more than a hundred years, having long since left the High Prince's palace in Jaharrad. Could she stay if he were moved again? Recalled by the High Prince—his host and patron, his *captor*, according to some—or by some other necessity?

Would she ever be a *Master*?

Would the Jaddians even permit such a thing? It had been a miracle that she had been permitted to study at the school at all. Father had obtained a grant for her from High Prince Aldia himself, guaranteed by the High Prince's grandson, Prince Kaim du Otranto, who was Father's dearest friend and a Master of the Second Circle.

The sight of the figure on the path ahead and below her drove these thoughts from her mind. It was unusual to find anyone climbing the *Scala Aspara* to the Shrine of the Atash Behram Jaddi so early in the day. The priests who tended the Eternal Flame were already at their place, and the students were rising even then to take the morning meal in Volcano House. For a moment—the barest moment—Cassandra thought him one of the masters, for he—like Hydarnes and Anamara and all the others—was clad in black. But the figure on the path wore no *mandyas*, no half-robe of white or indeed of any color, red or gold or saffron. He was yet far off, and so she might have been forgiven for not recognizing him, but as she reached the top of a terrace stair, the wind caught him, revealing the black of his

garments was not the slit tunic and loose, flowing pantaloons of the Fire School, but a long coat, military-fashion, with a high collar and silver buttons flashing in the sun.

“Hoy!” she raised a hand to him, feeling a new wind catch her up and spur her forward, forgetting her hunger, her exhaustion.

The man raised a hand but slowed in his steady approach—seeing her rushing down to meet him. He stopped beneath a flowering almond tree. The trees of Jadd were forever flowering, had been designed that way by the planet’s geneticists, its magi.

“What are you doing way up here at this hour?” he called, hand still raised in greeting. “Shouldn’t you be at drills in the Court of Swans?”

He didn’t know. Hydarnes had not told him.

That made Cassandra stop short. What should she say? She had not counted on being the one to tell him about Amuhia di Sanaan and the fight in the cherry garden. And yet she had started up the north side of the canal, knowing that he—if he took his morning constitutional—would climb up the south, traveling anti-clockwise as she did clockwise, dooming them to cross paths.

She had circled forward, while he was always circling back.

But he was smiling to see her, smiling that broken, lopsided smile of his—that smile that forever seemed to her as sad as it was happy. His hair was just as black as his long coat, his tunic and high boots, but shocked and streaked with white like lightning at temples and forelock. A pair of red-glassed spectacles shielded his eyes from the rising sun as he looked on her, hiding his violet eyes.

Cassandra could not help herself. She smiled, too. “*Buon sabbah, Abba!*”

Father’s smile did not falter, “Good morning to you, too.”

She knew that he was waiting for an answer to his question. There was no reason for her to be up so high at that hour, unless it were for the long

run that—after Karani’s Chair—was Master Hydarnes’s favorite punishment.

“I broke Amuhia di Sanaan’s teeth,” Cassandra said, for that had been the punished offense.

Hadrian Marlowe’s smile did falter then. “Her teeth?”

“She attacked me!” Cassandra said, voice growing more frantic by the word. “In the cherry garden. I was drilling with the dummy, and her and Naziha di Mortana, and that girl, Pieda! They...” It all came spilling out of her, its order confused, its meaning plain enough. How they had come with swords. To frighten her, at least. To attack her, possibly. How she had struck first, and injured Pieda’s wrist. How—at the end—she had smashed Amuhia in the mouth, breaking her *eali*-perfect teeth.

She told him how Master Hydarnes had found them—Grand Master Hydarnes du Novarra, of all the masters who might have come. “It isn’t fair!” she said. “They attacked me, Abba! I defended myself, and the master—he sends me up the White Stair! Not them!”

Father had listened to her story seemingly without breath or motion, his thumbs hooked in his belt as they so often were, his pointed chin tucked against his breast, peering over the silver rims of his glasses.

“It is *not* fair!” she exclaimed again. “Naziha’s father is Prince of Mortana, and Amuhia’s a satrap! The master says he will punish them, but he will not! You know what they will say! They will say it was *my* fault. *Me!* The wild-girl from the Empire! The *emondine!*”

Father made a slight face at the Jaddian slur, the reminder that they—despite the fact that he had lived on the holy planet for nearly two centuries, despite the fact that she had been born there and spent her every day on Jadd—would never *be* Jaddian.

“But you beat them?” Father asked, still peering over his glasses. “All three of them?”

“What?” Cassandra asked, surprised by the tangential cut of the question. “Yes. Or I would have, if Master Hydarnes hadn’t arrived when he did.”

“Perhaps then they have been punished enough, eh?” He shut one eye, lowered his glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Beaten by the *emondine*?” When Cassandra said nothing, he continued, “Has it occurred to you that Master Hydarnes has done you a kindness? By letting you sit in the White Square? You’ll be the one to tell your story, and before Amuhia and her friend can tell theirs, if they are in medica.”

“Naziha isn’t,” said Cassandra missing the point. She felt Father compress his lips in her heart before she looked up to see it. “But it had occurred to me, actually.”

“Good!” he said. “Good, you’re learning. Most of what happens isn’t only ever the one thing. There are always layers, dear girl.”

Hearing him speak, it occurred to Cassandra then that Master Hydarnes did not understand her father at all. They called him *Al Brutan* for the unpolished directness, the simple brutality of his sword technique, but Hadrian Marlowe was no mere blunt instrument. Those same hands that had disarmed Hydarnes himself were the very hands that brought forth her mother’s image from charcoal in loving and tender detail.

Her mother’s image . . .

“They called you a traitor!” she said.

If the word stung Hadrian Marlowe at all, he did not show it. “I am a traitor, by all the laws of the Imperium,” he said. “You know that.”

Cassandra chewed her lip, hung her head. “Abba, I . . .” She paused, afraid to go on, afraid to say the rest, afraid her words might dislodge the mask Father so carefully wore.

“What is it?”

“They said Mother was a witch,” she said, voice very small. “They said...” Something stopped her throat, and she swallowed. “They said I

don't have a mother."

She was not conscious of Father's having crossed the small space between them, and yet he had. He'd wrapped his arms around her, pressed his jaw against the top of her head. It was only then she realized she'd been crying. Not much, not freely.

"I'm sorry," she said, when he did not speak. "I'm sorry, Abba. I don't want to make trouble with the other students, I don't. But why did they say that?"

"It doesn't matter why they said it," Father said, not letting her go. His words escaped him, pressed small and flat and close together. "Your mother . . ." He stopped short himself, as though the memory of her mother was a bullet lodged in his ribs. "You did the right thing."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Do you think you did the right thing?" he said again, making it a question.

Cassandra hadn't thought about that. "I thought they'd come to beat me. They brought the swords. Cornered me in the *Paradi!*"

"Then you did right," said he, still not letting go.

"Then why did Master Hydarnes only punish me?" she asked. "It isn't right!"

"You don't know that he hasn't punished the others," Father said. "Or that he won't punish them." He drew back from her at last, his hands—both terribly scarred—came to rest upon her shoulders. "What happens to them does not matter, either. You are not their keeper, nor their master. It is your own fate that should concern you."

She only looked up at him, feeling at once only the little girl she had been. Raising one hand, she brushed at her eyes, not dislodging his hands from her shoulders. "My own fate?"

"Do you really think what you did was right? Really think about it."

She did.

She did.

Presently, nervously, Cassandra nodded.

“Then take the punishment,” Father said. Looking up and past her to the Shrine of the Eternal Fire, he continued, “You have climbed the mountain already. Is not the worst behind you?”

Cassandra thought about that, too. Again she nodded.

“If you believe you have served a higher justice than that of good Hydarnes, do not complain.” One rough hand moved from her shoulder to her cheek. One thumb brushed away her tears. “Have you forgotten why we’re here? Why *I* am here?”

Her head drooped. She had *not* forgotten. When she had struck Amuhia in her filthy mouth, it had been of Father she had thought. “You struck the Emperor.”

“Because he told me your mother was *nothing*,” he said, hands falling to his side. He half turned away. There was a brittleness in his tone Cassandra had but rarely heard. It scared her more than anything, more than the moment Father’s unseen mask had slipped in his combat with Hydarnes. There was a shadow in him and a tempest more terrible than anything in her world, but that tempest never fell on her. Not once, not ever, though ever and anon she caught the barest hint of its wind. When he shut himself in his study for days at a time . . . when she caught sight of him wading out into the noctilucous waters alone in the dark of night . . . when she had first asked him about the talon-scars on his cheek . . .

But seeing him like that, so exposed, Cassandra did not know what to do.

She wanted to run.

She wanted to rush to him.

She did neither of those things.

She did not move.

“Nothing,” Father said again. “She was only a Tavrosi, he said. So I broke his nose.”

“You broke his nose?” Cassandra asked, shocked. She had never heard that detail, not from him, not from Neema, not from any of the others. “The Red Emperor’s . . . ?”

Father’s broken half-smile returned. “It was justice. My justice. And I have paid for it.” He spread his hands. “All of Jadd is my prison, girl. Our prison. Yours and mine.” Above his head, a wind tossed the branches of the flowering almond tree, carrying loose blossoms over the rail of the Grand Canal and down into the sluice of flowing molten rock.

Cassandra followed the canal with her eyes, a line of red fire descending the Hephaistos to Volcano House, and from Volcano House to the sea. The red lava made her think of blood, as though the ancient Jaddians had laid open a vein in the earth itself.

“I never told you how we met, your mother and I.”

Father’s words recaptured her attention, and she turned to look at the dark figure of the man beneath the almond tree. She did not dare speak, afraid that to do so would be to shatter the fell mood that had fallen on Lord Hadrian Marlowe.

He had removed his glasses, was studying her with violet eyes—the Marlowe eyes he had not given her. “It was much the same.”

“Much the same?” She didn’t understand.

“I was a slave,” he said. “A prisoner of the Count of Emesh. He purchased me from the coliseum when he learned I could speak the Cielcin tongue. I was to instruct his children. They never learned. Your mother was a guest of the Count’s. She was studying the . . . ” He hesitated, as if unsure how best to continue. His voice was far away. “The native xenobites. She hated me, at first, because I had been a myrmidon.”

Cassandra’s eyes grew wide. “You were a gladiator?”

“No,” he said. “A slave, like I said. I sold myself for bread and board after I fled home . . . I had nothing. Nothing. But I loved your mother at once. She was . . . the hardest woman I ever knew. The finest.”

“She was beautiful . . . ” Cassandra said. It was all she could say, all she truly knew.

She had been born from a drop of crystallized blood, a genetic sample preserved in the silver disc Father wore about his neck. A single cell scraped off and reconstituted had been enough to make the egg the Jaddian mages used to give her life. That cell had been hundreds of years old when she was conceived, her mother more than a hundred years dead.

All Cassandra had were Father’s drawings.

And his words.

“She was that,” he said, “and a better woman than I deserved. I loved her at once, as I said. It took her a good bit longer to love me.” He smiled then, and laughed softly, but that smile only deepened the shadow over him, and that laughter did not drive it off. He fidgeted with his glasses, as if he meant to restore them to his face and so hide his violet eyes. “I killed a man for her. Over her. A priest of the Terran Chantry.” He paused, and Cassandra realized he was looking at her, that smile growing brighter, though he did not change his face. “He called her a witch, too.”

She matched his smile, dared to at last. “Really?”

“I dueled him for it.” He turned his face away. “Your mother was so angry with me.”

“Angry with you?” That Father should fight to defend her mother seemed the rightest thing in the world.

“She hated fighting,” Father said. “And hated anyone fighting for her.”

The black sense of shame returned, and Cassandra bowed her head again, caught one of her twin braids in both hands, ran her fingers along it. “Then . . . should I not have . . . ”

“No,” he said with force. “No, you did no more than I would have done, and perhaps less—if that comforts you.”

It did not.

“I only wish . . . I only wish they would stop,” she said. “I have lived here all my life. When will they accept that I’m one of them?”

“One of *them*?” Father echoed, cocking his head. “A Jaddian? You are not. You will never be, even if you graduate the Fire School a Master of the Ninth Circle—as Hydarnes assures me you will in time.”

A welter of emotion fought in her. Pain at the thought she would never belong there—in her own home. Hatred of Amuhia and the other girls. Anger. At Hydarnes for his punishment of her. At the Jaddians for their unjust sense of superiority. At their alien god. Joy at Father’s praise. Pride at the idea that Hydarnes believed she could go the distance.

She felt it all.

“Then what am I?”

Father looked down at her, confusion etched on his scarred face, crow’s feet spreading from the corners of his eyes. “What you have always been, Anaryan,” he said, gripping her hand—the hand that had smashed the teeth from Amuhia di Sanaan’s mouth. “My daughter, and yourself.”

AFTERWORD

* * *

I hope you've enjoyed this third digital collection of short stories from the Sun Eater Universe. As ever, it is my privilege to be able to write for you, dear Reader. If you missed the first and second volumes of *Tales of the Sun Eater*, you can find copies here:

1. [Volume 1: My Book](#)
2. Volume 2: My Book

This volume is only available as an ebook. As mentioned in the introduction, it is my intention to eventually release a complete collection of *all* the short fiction set in the Sun Eater universe as a single volume, but until that time, these stories will only be available as a part of this ebook-exclusive series, and I appreciate your patience and understanding.

If this was your first foray into the Sun Eater Universe—welcome! I very much hope you'll check out my other titles. Hadrian Marlowe's story begins in *Empire of Silence*.

Check out my Amazon Author Page here:
<https://www.amazon.com/Christopher-Ruocchio/e/B07FZX5GSD/>

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